

On detecting high indoor crowd density with non-participatory Wi-Fi localization

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Abstract

We address the problem of detecting highly raised crowd density in situations such as indoor dance events. We propose a new method for estimating crowd density by anonymous, non-participatory, indoor Wi-Fi localization of smart phones. Using a probabilistic model inspired by statistical mechanics, and relying only on big data analytics, we tackle three challenges: (1) the ambiguity of Wi-Fi based indoor positioning, which appears regardless of whether the latter is performed with machine learning or with optimization, (2) the MAC address randomization when a device is not connected, and (3) the volatility of packet interarrival times.

The main result is that our estimation becomes more – rather than less – accurate when the crowd size increases. This property is crucial for detection of dangerous crowd density.

Keywords: big data analytics, crowd density estimation, probabilistic modeling, indoor Wi-Fi localization

1 Introduction

Crowd disasters have taken many human lives. The Love Parade disaster (Duisburg, 2010), the Ellis Park Stadium disaster (Johannesburg, 2001), the PhilSports Stadium

stampede (Manila, 2006) are just a few examples. One of the reasons such disasters happen is a “lack of overview of everybody” [1], that is, a lack of macroscopic overview of the crowd. In particular, critical crowd density is one of the main factors to crowd disasters [1, 2]. Yet, it is still challenging to determine timely when it occurs, so that a disaster can be prevented by navigating the rest of the crowd away from the congestion. In this work we address the problem of estimating crowd density in situations such as indoor concert events.

A lot of research on estimating crowd density has been done using video processing from security cameras [3, 4]. However, this approach does not suffice to detect critically raised crowd density. Firstly, as mentioned before, it is difficult to obtain macroscopic overview of the crowd. Secondly, the lighting conditions during concert hours might not be sufficient for video-based crowd analysis only. Finally, the error of video-based people counting increases with the increase of the actual crowd density [5] due to so-called occlusion effects.

In our approach, which can complement the video-based analysis, we exploit the ubiquity of smart phones, as it has been done in [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. More concretely, our approach is non-participatory, that is, it does not require participation from the crowd.

Despite the recent success in using wireless technologies for positioning and crowd counting, several problems remain open. Firstly, there is the problem of ambiguity when attempting Wi-Fi based indoor localization [15, 16, 17, 18], which is a major source of localization errors. Secondly, when a phone is not connected, its Media Access Control (MAC) address may change (be “randomized”) over time [19], complying to privacy policies, thus making it impossible to track the user over time. Finally, since we do not rely on crowd participation, the signals from the phones are quite irregular in time [20], meaning that real-time tracking of a device is also challenging.

In this paper we address the aforementioned three problems as follows. To address the ambiguity problem, we apply concepts from statistical mechanics: rather than estimating the most likely position of a visitor in real time, we create an evolving probability distribution over all possible positions of the visitor. We rely on the fact that we have a lot of data (or visitors), to estimate the crowd density by aggregating the individual distributions. We use the abundance of data again and the fact that the structure of the MAC address reveals whether it has been randomized, to account for the fact that a portion of the devices are not trackable. Finally, we deploy a time-out based memory model for dealing with the volatile signal rates.

Applying primarily the law of large numbers leads to our main result; namely, that our estimation becomes more (rather than less) precise when the crowd size increases, even without requiring crowd participation. This property is crucial for being able to detect critically raised crowd density.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 explains briefly our data collection process and the Wi-Fi localization methods that we use. Section 3 introduces in more detail the problems related to crowd density estimation. Section 4 proposes a new method for crowd density estimation that addresses the mentioned problems. In Section 5 the performances of our method are analyzed. Section 6 contrasts our method to related work, and Section 7 ends with conclusions.

2 Underpinning technologies, methods and data

2.1 Data collection and privacy protection

The in-house data and videos used in this paper were collected during the Sensation 2015 dance event in the Amsterdam ArenA (today Johan Cruijff ArenA) football stadium. We used 30 Wi-Fi routers (access points) distributed in the east corner and in the west side of the stadium. (The white dress code of this particular dance event in 2015 made it suitable for evaluation with video data.) We processed Wi-Fi signals and estimated the coordinates of Wi-Fi enabled devices using a method similar to trilateration, that we explain in the next subsection.

Usage of smart phones to identify user's locations inevitably raises the question of privacy concerns. The system that we use has been designed from the ground up with privacy in mind - no privacy sensitive data is stored. Only a minimal set of data is collected (timestamp, access point, signal strength and identifier). The unique MAC identifiers of the phones are hashed (anonymized) on reception. The data is not stored on site, but passed on streaming to a trusted third party. The third party maps the hashed identifiers once again. The final identifier is stored in an environment only accessible for the data scientists participating in this project. As a result, none of the involved parties have sufficient information to extract the original MAC address.

Following the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Dutch law for handling personal data, laid down in the *Personal Data Protection Act* (Wbp) (Section 12.2) [21], we do not publish any part of the data, and only reveal statistical and aggregated results about the crowd. The data analytics Jupyter Notebook scripts together with the output (aggregated results) that led to the insights and research results presented in this paper can be found in [22].

2.2 Localization of smart phones with Wi-Fi sensors

Smart phones transmit Wi-Fi signals which are captured at the Wi-Fi access points (AP's). The captured signals contain information about the measured received signal strength (RSS). Widely used methods for positioning using RSS values are multilateration and fingerprinting [23]. In what follows we give a brief overview of the two methods.

2.2.1 Localization by multilateration

Using Friis equation for the relationship between the RSS and the distance between a transmitter and a receiver, the distance between the smart phone and the AP can be estimated. When we have the exact distances from a smart phone to at least three AP's, the position of the smart phone can be uniquely determined at the intersection of three circles (Figure 1a). [24].

However, in practice the measured RSS values contain unpredictable variation due to noise and interference such as absorption and reflection by obstacles (e.g. human bodies). As a result, the circles in the lateration method do not intersect at a unique point (see e.g. Figure 1b). In this case an optimization procedure is undertaken for positioning of the smart phone using more than three APs and, in our case, all received RSS values within 500 milliseconds. We use the least squares optimization method, which in our case

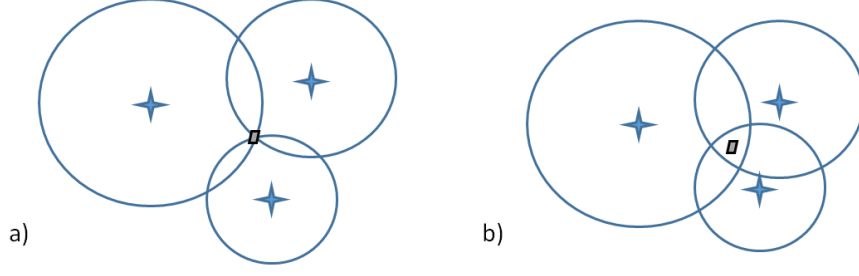


Figure 1: Estimating position with trilateration: a) precise b) rough

takes the form of a chi-square data fit. An exact description of the method is beyond the scope of this paper and we refer the reader to [25, 26] for details. We note, however, that the statistical estimation of the position provides us also with standard deviation, which we will use in Section 4.

2.2.2 Localization by fingerprinting

Traditional fingerprinting is also RSS-based. There are 'offline' and 'online' phase of the localization. In the 'offline' phase, for a moving client device, the signal strengths from several access points in range are continuously recorded and stored in a database along with the known coordinates of the device [27, 28]. During the 'online' tracking phase, the current RSS vector of a device at an unknown location is compared to those stored in the fingerprint and the closest match is returned as the estimated user location. The closest match is usually determined through probabilistic methods (e.g. expectation maximization, KL-divergence) or through machine learning techniques (e.g. k-nearest neighbors, Support Vector Machines, neural networks).

3 Problem statement

Under ideal circumstances, the positioning itself would suffice to estimate the spatial crowd density distribution: every second we would only need to count the number of detections per square meter. However, Wi-Fi based localization introduces the following challenges, which are not related to the mathematical methodology behind the positioning step, and prevent us to apply direct counting.

1. *Issue 1: Ambiguity of localization procedures.* When using RSS values for localization, it has been argued that one of the biggest source of errors is the absence of a single global optimum [16]. In the fingerprinting approaches the phenomenon is called "fingerprinting twins" [15, 16], while in the multilateration approaches it is known as "flip ambiguity" [17, 29, 18]. We have also sampled randomly 20 MAC addresses from the Sensation data under various crowd conditions and plotted the estimations of their coordinates through time. We have plotted only the estimations with a relatively small (conditional) uncertainty. We observed persistent bimodal distribution of the estimations (as if the device is being teleported constantly), an example of which can be seen in Figure 2 (left). This figure shows the estimated

x-coordinates in meters through time of a static MAC device that was persistent for 24 hours (most probably an AP).

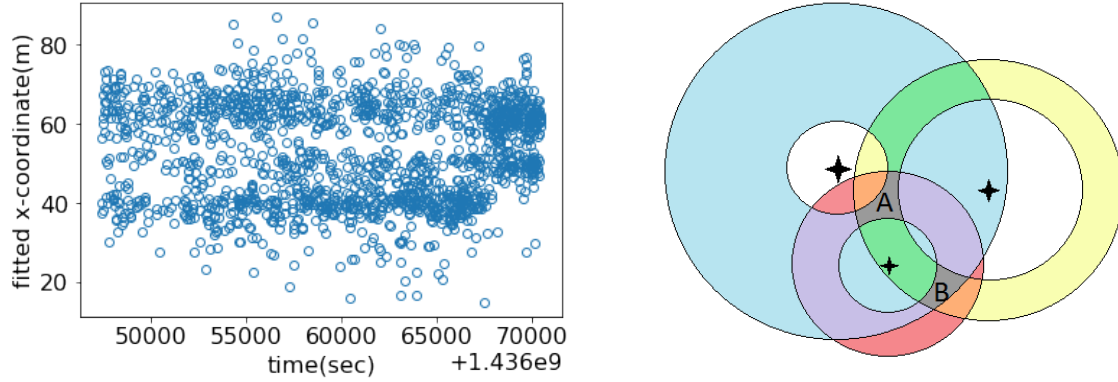


Figure 2: (Left) Estimation of x-coordinate in meters of a static MAC device through time; (Right) RSS based positioning can lead to multiple local optima

The "twins" phenomenon originates from the fact that the environmental settings and the temporal variations in the RSS create opportunities for multiple local optima [18], in case of trilateration, or geographically distant positions to share the same RSS vectors [16], in case of fingerprinting. To understand the problem, consider Figure 2 (right). In the center of every ring there is an access point, that has estimated signal strength to the MAC device with a certain error range. The error range is represented by the thickness of the ring. Then, there are two possible regions where all three rings overlap (A and B) which are equally good candidates for the positioning of the MAC device. Note that the problem can arise regardless of the thickness of the rings and the number of APs, and that it cannot be alleviated without using additional information or assumption about the visitors or the environment. For example, current solutions require crowd participation [16] or assume crowd mobility [15].

2. *Issue 2: Volatility of packet rates.* When a MAC device is connected to the Wi-Fi Internet, it sends packets with a relatively stable and frequent rate. However, during concert hours, very few devices are actually connected to the Internet or used at all. So, most of our estimations of positions come from signals that the device sends in a "probing" mode, i.e. while searching for a network. In this case the packet rate is quite volatile, ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes [20]. This introduces challenges when trying to estimate the total number of devices present at a certain moment.
3. *Issue 3: MAC address randomization.* Due to ever increasing privacy concerns and possibly other business reasons, starting from 2014, the Apple iPhones have introduced randomization of the MAC address when the device is in a probing mode (not connected to Internet) [20]. This means that devices not connected to the Internet are continuously changing their MAC addresses and cannot be followed over time. It is worth noting, however, that from the MAC address itself it can be determined whether the address is an original MAC non-randomized address or a randomized one.

4 Crowd density estimation

In this section, as a main contribution of the paper, we propose solutions to the issues stated in the previous section.

4.1 Estimation under localization ambiguity

Creating statistical ensembles In order to deal with the localization ambiguity, let us start with the following observation: we are *not* interested in the individual locations of the MAC devices, but rather in the *density* of the crowd. Also, it is very important to have more precise estimation when the number of people in the stadium is large and dense spots are likely, so that the crowd outside a very dense region can be promptly navigated away from it. At the same time, obtaining precision at low crowd density has a smaller priority.

To this end, we propose a probabilistic model for crowd density estimation. To explain our idea, we use the scenario depicted in Figure 2 (right). We can say that the MAC device is located in region A with a probability of 0.5 and in region B with a probability of 0.5 (we assign the probabilities in a trivial way for the purpose of illustration). Although this approach does not provide us with very useful information about the location of the MAC device, if we apply the same reasoning for all MAC devices, and we add together the spatial probability density functions for all MAC devices, we end up with a spatial distribution of the crowd density. If we assume that the locations of the MAC devices are mutually independent and identically distributed, we can apply directly the standard law of large numbers and conclude that for a large crowd the error of the estimation of the density per square meter will vanish. (The diffusion animation in [30] provides a nice visual demonstration of the concept.) However, we cannot assume the mentioned criteria because e.g. people tend to go to concerts in groups, that is, their locations are correlated [31, 32]. Therefore, the variance of the estimation in the limiting case is equal to the average covariance between the locations. In Section 5 we show that the average covariance still tends to zero as the crowd size increases, because for a regular crowd at a concert, the group size is relatively small compared to the entire crowd.

Computing individual probability distributions Next, we proceed with defining $Prob(m \in R)$ for an arbitrary MAC device m and region R , that is, the probability that a MAC device m is located in region R , in order to be able to evaluate the estimated crowd density per region.

The localization ("fitting") provides us with a series of estimated positions of mobile devices. We estimate the spatial probability distribution for an arbitrary MAC device along a moving time window. Our first step at time t is to select the N estimated positions whose time stamps fall within a specified time window $[t - \Delta t, t]$ from the data. A natural way to construct a two-dimensional probability distribution would be to create a histogram, by binning the N positions and normalizing with N . In case data has been fitted with multi-lateration, the optimization method provides also for a Gaussian error of the estimate (see Section 2.2). Therefore, we first "smooth" each of the N positions into a bivariate Gaussian distribution, using the standard deviations of the estimation (x, y) (σ_{xi} and σ_{yi}) provided by the localization procedure. Then, for the MAC device

207 m we generate a two-dimensional probability density function (pdf) by adding up the
 208 separate ‘bumps’ and normalizing by N . (See Figure 3 for an example of smoothing a
 209 histogram.)

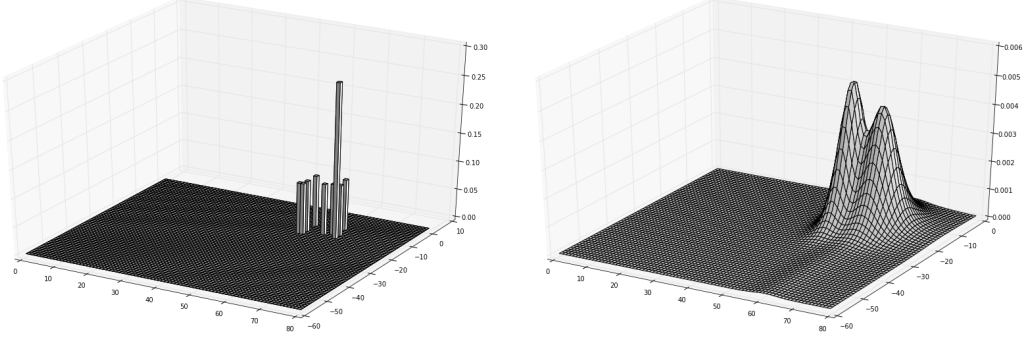


Figure 3: Smoothing a histogram with Gaussian kernels. Left: Original histogram. Right: Smoothed histogram.

210 Formally, the implementation of our method is similar to that of kernel density esti-
 211 mation [33, 34]. In our case the amount of smoothing is variable and determined by the
 212 uncertainty values σ_x and σ_y . The pdf for a MAC device m at a location (x, y) is defined
 213 by

$$\hat{f}_m(x, y) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N K((x - x_i), \sigma_{xi}) K((y - y_i), \sigma_{yi}) \quad (1)$$

214 where the kernel function K is given by

$$K(u, \sigma) = \frac{1}{\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}} \exp\left(-\frac{u^2}{2\sigma^2}\right) \quad (2)$$

215 and (x_i, y_i) is the result of positioning at step $i \in \{1, N\}$.

216 In order to evaluate $Prob(m \in R)$, we need to integrate $\hat{f}_m(x, y)$ for $(x, y) \in R$. The
 217 final crowd density estimation at point (x, y) is given by

$$\hat{f}_T(x, y) = \sum_m \hat{f}_m(x, y) \quad (3)$$

218 Finally, in order to estimate the number of people in region R , we need to integrate
 219 $\hat{f}_T(x, y)$ over the region R .

220 **Remark 1.** In our implementation we scale up the individual probability distribution,
 221 such that it integrates to one inside the region of the stadium (the concert venue). We
 222 assume that if a device was detected by the AP’s, it was inside the stadium, and thus the
 223 probability that it is in the stadium should be one. In the future we also plan to include
 224 the map of the stadium, to incorporate the fact that the probability that a visitor is in a
 225 region inaccessible by visitors is zero.

226 Note that so far we assumed that in every time window there is at least one estimate
 227 for every MAC device present in the stadium. In what follows we explain how we capture
 228 the cases when this assumption does not hold.

4.2 "Conservation of mass" under packet rates volatility

To address the second issue raised in Section 3, *Volatility of packet rates*, we ensure that we do not forget about the MAC devices that were not observed in the last time window. In fact, for every MAC device that was ever observed, until it is observed again, we maintain the old probability distribution. However, we also apply a time-out, that is, if a MAC device has not been observed in a long enough time interval (called 'memory' parameter), it is simply removed from the pool of MAC devices.

4.3 Estimation under MAC address randomization

The previous discussion assumes that a MAC device does not change its identifier over time. However, as we noted in Section 3, a device in a probing mode might *randomize* its address during a time window or before its time-out occurs, leading to it being counted twice.

To address the last issue from Section 3, *MAC address randomization*, we rely on the fact that we have a lot of data once again and on the fact that we know from the structure of the MAC address whether it has been randomized or not. Figure 4 (left) shows the time series of numbers of non-randomized and randomized addresses observed per minute from midnight until around 6:00 am during the Sensation concert. We observe that their ratio is stable through time (Figure 4 (right)); the Pearson correlation coefficient between the time series of randomized and non-randomized addresses is 0.88.

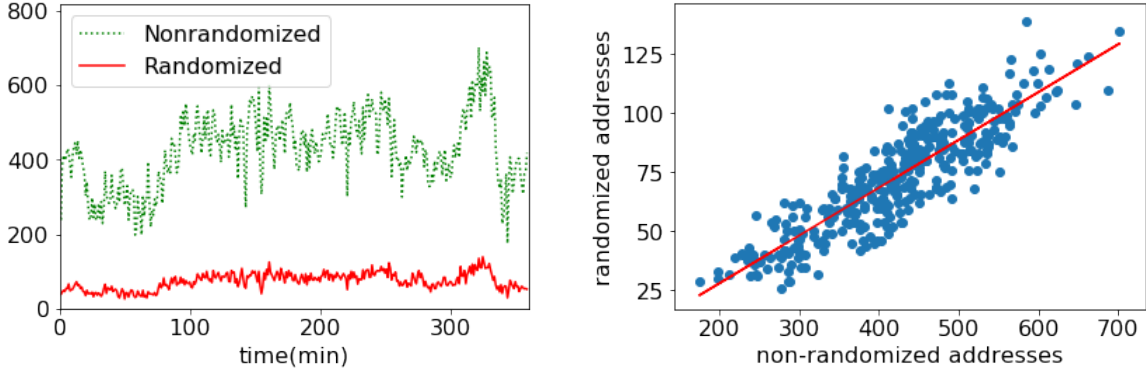


Figure 4: (Left) Number of non-randomized and randomized addresses observed per minute; (Right) Linear regression plot of randomized and non-randomized addresses observed per minute

Therefore, when estimating crowd density, we ignore the MAC devices that have randomized addresses and at the end we multiply the crowd density by a factor to account for the discarded MAC devices. This factor is derived from the slope of the linear regression fit of the two time series (Figure 4), which in our case turns out to be 0.2, with a standard error of 0.006.

Note also that this proportion should be re-computed periodically to account for the changing conditions at the smart phones market, but also for the fact that an increasing number of stadiums across the world offer "smart" services that motivate visitors to connect to the Wi-Fi network, which makes their MAC addresses non-randomized (fixed). Some studies [35, 20] suggest that it is still possible to follow devices despite

MAC randomization, and it would be interesting in the future to see if we can improve our methodology taking those studies into account.

5 Performance analysis

In this section we analyze our method for crowd density estimation in various manners: analytically, with simulations, and using two real-life datasets. (Note: Section 5.1 offers a formal validation that readers uninterested in technical details can skip without loss.)

5.1 Theoretical analysis under correlated groups

We show formally that the relative error of the crowd density estimation converges to zero when the crowd size increases, despite having correlated groups of visitors (e.g. friends).

Let $\{mac_1, mac_2, \dots, mac_n\}$ be all n MAC devices detected in the stadium at time t . Due to the results in Section 4.3, where we show how we can safely discard the randomized addresses from the analysis, we can assume here that all n MAC addresses are fixed. In what follows we omit t from the notation for clarity. Let R be an arbitrary region of the stadium. Denote by $mac_i \in R$ the statement “the device mac_i is in region R ”. Let X_i be a random variable defined by

$$X_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } mac_i \in R \\ 0 & \text{if } mac_i \notin R \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

Denote by X the total number of devices in R detected at time t . Clearly, $X = \sum_{i=1}^n X_i$. Then $E(X)$, the expected value of X is

$$\begin{aligned} E(X) &= E\left(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i\right) = \sum_{i=1}^n E(X_i) \\ &= \sum_{i=1}^n (1 \cdot Prob(mac_i \in R) + 0 \cdot Prob(mac_i \notin R)) = \sum_{i=1}^n Prob(mac_i \in R), \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

where by $Prob(mac_i \in R)$ we denote the probability that mac_i is in the region R at time t . We will show that the variance of X/n , that is, the variance of the proportion of devices detected in region R out of all detected devices, diminishes when n becomes large (note that the variance of X in the limiting case is out of our interest because in this case $E(X)$ is also potentially infinite). This suffices to show that our method for estimation of crowd density is theoretically sound, given the probabilities $Prob(mac_i \in R)$. We have

$$Var\left(\frac{X}{n}\right) = \frac{1}{n^2} \cdot Var\left(\sum_{i=1}^n X_i\right) = \frac{1}{n^2} \cdot \left(\sum_{i=1}^n Var(X_i) + \sum_{i \neq j} Cov(X_i, X_j)\right) \quad (6)$$

Let γ be an upper limit on the number of people going to a concert together (i.e. whose locations are correlated). Note that, because the random variables $\{X_i\}_{i=1}^n$ take values in $\{0, 1\}$, the covariances $Cov(X_i, X_j)$ take values in $[-1, 1]$. Thus, the covariances are upper-bounded (by 1). Denote by $\kappa \leq 1$ the maximal covariance between any X_i and

285 X_j and let us write $i \sim j$ if and only if the owners of the MAC devices mac_i and mac_j
 286 are in the same group of friends. Then,

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{i \neq j} Cov(X_i, X_j) &= 2 \sum_{1 \leq i < j \leq n} Cov(X_i, X_j) = 2 \sum_{i, j: i \sim j} Cov(X_i, X_j) \\ &\leq 2n \cdot \frac{\gamma(\gamma - 1)}{2} \cdot \kappa = n\kappa\gamma(\gamma - 1). \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

287 Here the inequality holds because the maximal number of groups is n and the maximal
 288 number of pairs (i, j) in a group is $\gamma(\gamma - 1)/2$. Let us denote by $\nu = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n Var(X_i)$
 289 the average variance of $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n$ (note that $\nu \leq 1$ from the definition of $\{X_i\}_{i=1}^n$).
 290 From (6) and (7) we have

$$Var\left(\frac{X}{n}\right) \leq \frac{1}{n^2}(n\nu + n\kappa\gamma(\gamma - 1)) = \frac{1}{n}(\nu + \kappa\gamma(\gamma - 1)), \quad (8)$$

291 which tends to 0 when $n \rightarrow \infty$. Note that we have greatly overestimated the covariance
 292 with the inequality in (7), which means that in practice the variance converges to 0 much
 293 faster than presented.

294 With the above, we have proven a version of the law of the large numbers that is
 295 generally applicable. We formalize our results in the following proposition:

296 **Proposition.** *Let $\{X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n\}$ be random variables that always take values in a bounded
 297 real interval. Suppose that the set $\{X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n\}$ can be partitioned into subsets of max-
 298 imal size γ (a fixed constant independent of n), such that if X_i and X_j belong to different
 299 subsets, then $Cov(X_i, X_j) = 0$. Let $S_n = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n X_i$. Then*

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} Var(S_n) = 0.$$

300 **Remark 2.** In the above exposition we assumed that there is an upper limit γ , inde-
 301 pendent of the total number of people n , of a number of people whose locations are
 302 correlated. There is however one scenario, a “crowd crush”, when the crowd is so dense
 303 (> 6 persons per m^2) [2] that people cannot move freely anymore and the entire crowd
 304 becomes a “group” (as in the Love Parade disaster), implying that all visitors locations
 305 are (positively) correlated. In this work we aim to detect high density with our method
 306 *before* this saturation happens to be able to react preventively; otherwise, it is too late.

307 5.2 Analysis with simulations

308 Section 5.1 gives a theoretical validation of the method. We proceed with analyzing
 309 the method experimentally, i.e. quantitatively. We are especially interested in how our
 310 method performs at dangerously high densities, i.e. more than 4 persons per square
 311 meter. Such densities are however difficult to obtain from real life scenarios; moreover,
 312 if we use video data as ground truth, the latter is inaccurate at high densities [5]. On
 313 the other hand, controlled experiments with thousands of participants and high induced
 314 crowd density are beyond the scope of a research paper because of security risks. To
 315 validate the method at high densities, we use data-driven stochastic simulations [36].

5.2.1 Simulations setup

For linearly increasing crowd size in a football stadium (playfield) we simulate the localization data and apply the proposed method on it. We use the Sensation dataset to derive the probability distributions of the uncertainties of the localization procedure that were discussed in Section 3. Concretely, our analysis of the dataset shows that (i) Median packet inter-arrival time for non-randomized MAC devices is 33 sec at the most overloaded AP, and the time is exponentially distributed (Figure 5); (ii) Mean distance (obtained by random sub-sampling) between the modes of the two Gaussians from Section 3 for static devices (APs) is circa 20m (see also Figure 2), and the standard deviations of the Gaussians are on average around 3m, regardless of the crowd size; (iii) the average Gaussian error of the positioning process is also 3m and the distribution of all errors is exponential.

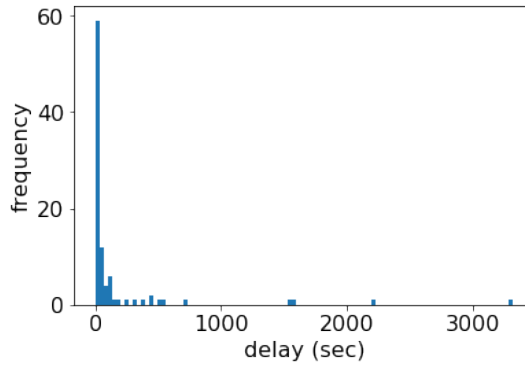


Figure 5: Distribution of packet inter-arrival times for a non-randomized address.

The crowd simulation is performed as follows. Every person moves in a zig-zag motion, in a random direction, because it has been discussed [37] that under high density visitors try to escape in a sort of zigzag motion, without any preference on direction, but only taking any free space nearby. The velocity is limited by the current crowd density via the Weidmann’s equation [38, 8]. We also introduce correlated positions: for crowd size of n the number of groups is $n/4$ and every person is randomly assigned to a group (thus the average group size is 4).

After recording the original simulated positions for every second, we create the synthetic localization data. The ”twins” or ”teleportation through time” effect is introduced by displacing the positions randomly following the distributions in (ii) above. The positioning errors are sampled following (iii). The packets (and thus location fits) are sub-sampled randomly with inter-arrival time drawn from an exponential distribution with a median 33 s, following (i) above. Each MAC address is randomized with a probability of 0.15 following the results in Section 4.3. The randomized addresses change their MAC values in every sent packet.

Remark 3. We opted to implement our own crowd simulation instead of using available crowd simulators or models, because the latter are built for different purposes. In other words, in crowd simulators it is challenging to implement high crowd density [37] and correlated groups of friends [39]; on the other hand, we are clearly not interested in the exact pattern of movement of the visitors which is the focus of crowd simulators –

any positive effect from simulating visitors movement on a fine scale is flattened by the uncertainties of circa 20m and signal sparseness introduced by the Wi-Fi data.

5.2.2 Deriving the optimal parameters values

Our method requires two parameters: the length of the time window, in which the location estimates for a device are counted towards its probability distribution, and the time-out, in terms of number of windows, for keeping old distributions ('memory').

We argue that the value of the time window Δt should be a compromise between the following requirements: 1) having a window long enough such that we can expect to localize each present non-randomized MAC device at least once in it (which should suffice since we also have the memory parameter to make sure that we don't miss devices) and 2) having a window not too long because of crowd mobility. In order to estimate Δt , we combine (1) the median packet inter-arrival time per non-randomized MAC address at the most overloaded access point, which from our data is 33 seconds, and (2) the results from [20], where the author concludes that, while in probing mode, on average smart phones send probing requests 55 times per hour. We choose as intuitively good value for Δt to be roughly 40 seconds. For high crowd density this value is still small enough to not cause outdated positioning. For example, if the crowd density is $4p/m^2$, the maximum distance that a person can travel in 40s according to Weidmann's equation is $8m$ [8], which is acceptable given the localization uncertainties. If the crowd density is $5p/m^2$, the maximum distance that a person can travel in 40s is $2m$.

Considering the memory parameter, our experiments show that it depends on the average crowd density and ranges from 0 windows backwards for expected average density $< 1p/m^2$, to 5 windows for densities $> 4p/m^2$. Intuitively this is justified by the fact that low density crowd can move faster and old distributions become soon outdated, while dense crowd moves slowly and having higher memory enables not missing any visitors, for the reasons of being able to detect highly raised crowd density. On the other hand, it can be checked that the probability that a device will send two signals within 5 windows is greater than 99% and it is thus not necessary to keep old estimates for longer. Figure 6b gives examples of performance of our method w.r.t. the ground truth and fitted data for various values of the memory parameter (we will analyze the case memory=5 in Section 5.2.3). The measurements are taken after 9 windows, to allow enough time for the system to 'warm up' [36]. The crowd density estimation in the case of fitted locations, where the fits are sparse, has been performed by making a snapshot of all devices that have been detected in the last 40 sec. Note that the latter estimation already incorporates partly our method, regarding the window size; however we present it in the figure as it serves as a reference point. Finally, there is one choice parameter, the time step of the moving window, which depends on how often one would like to have updates of the probability distributions, having in mind the computational efficiency, that depends also on hardware. We choose in this paper a time step of 30 sec.

5.2.3 Results from simulations analysis

To see the effect of our method over performing direct counting on fitted data, we first perform the following experiment. We simulate a 'static' crowd with regular fits (every second) and no MAC randomization, where by 'static' we mean that nobody moves. In

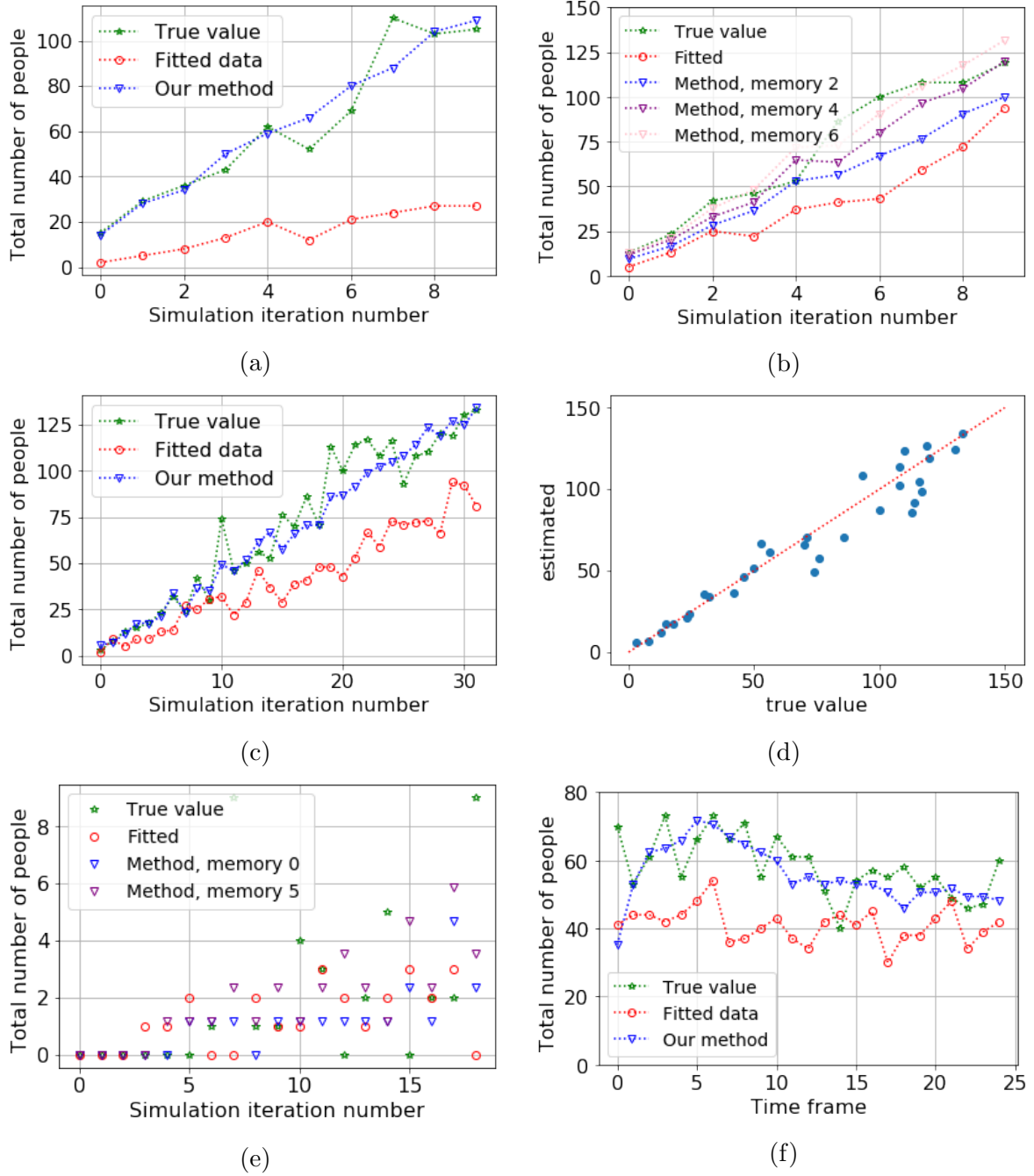


Figure 6: Performance of our method, when applied to the 'fitted' positions in a region of 4m x 4m. a) The 'static' crowd scenario; b) Full simulation, varying the memory parameter; c) Full simulation, memory = 5; d) Scatter plot of case c), true value vs method estimation; e) Performance for very low density; f) An overview of performance through time for one simulation.

other words, we simulate only the 'teleportation' effect introduced by the bi-modal distributions of localization through time. We test the performances of our method w.r.t. simple counting of fitted positions in a 4mx4m corner of the stadium. Figure 6a shows the performance of our method versus simple counting for 10 independent simulations

with increasing total crowd size. Our method performs well w.r.t. simple counting of last fitted locations because it ensures that all detected devices are in the stadium by re-normalizing the corresponding probability distributions. Next, as discussed in Section 5.2.2, we apply our method with window size of 40 sec, time step of 30 sec and memory of 5 windows to independent full simulations as explained in Section 5.2.1 (with correlated crowd movement, packet delays and MAC randomization), increasing linearly the crowd size in every simulation. The results computed in a 4m x 4m square in the middle of the playfield are shown in Figures 6c and 6d. To contrast the performance for high crowd densities to the performance for low crowd density, we include an example of the latter in Figure 6e, which shows that the method can be expected to underperform for low crowd density. (Note that this estimation is under a worse case scenario, where everybody moves all the time with a normal walking speed). However, we are focused on having precise estimation under high densities. Figure 6f shows the performances through time of our method for a fairly dense crowd in the same 4mx4m region of the playfield. Again, for comparison we include also the plot of the fitted data in the last 40s, noting that this calculation partially implements our method.

5.3 Analysis under university campus scenario

With simulations we explored worse case scenarios and showed the effectiveness of the proposed method. In this subsection we explore how the method behaves in normal conditions, with relatively low expected crowd density. We use the publicly available UJIIndoorLoc dataset [40] that has been designed for benchmarking fingerprinting methods for Wi-Fi positioning. The ground truth of the dataset is given by the GPS locations of 25 devices worn by more than 20 participants. The participants moved across the Jaume university campus. To generate positioning ("fitted") data on which to apply our method, we use the software for Wi-Fi positioning based on RSS fingerprinting provided by [41, 42]. More concretely, we apply the affinity propagation method for clustering RSS fingerprints and the positioning method provided by [43] to generate the fits. To be able to have more test data and also because we are not interested in obtaining high precision fits, but rather to see the effect of our method applied to the latter, we use the small test dataset in [40] for training and the bigger train dataset for testing. (This is also in line with the reasoning in the design of the dataset in [42] where the training dataset is smaller than the testing dataset). We obtain fitted locations with an average error of 14m. Note that this error is not of Gaussian type (it could be also due to the "twins" effect), and therefore we do not apply the kernel smoothing part of our method to the probability distributions. The memory is 0 in this low density case and the MAC randomization factor does not apply because this was a controlled experiment. Figure 7 shows the results of applying our method to the 'fitted' data. We calculated 433 windows with a time step of 30 sec and window 40 sec. The first window starts at 1804000 seconds after the first recorded timestamp in the dataset (in this period the number of detected devices was the highest). For counting people based on detected phones sending GPS locations, we also apply a window of 40 sec, that is we make a snapshot of the last positions of the devices detected in the last 40 sec (because GPS locations are also not regularly recorded).

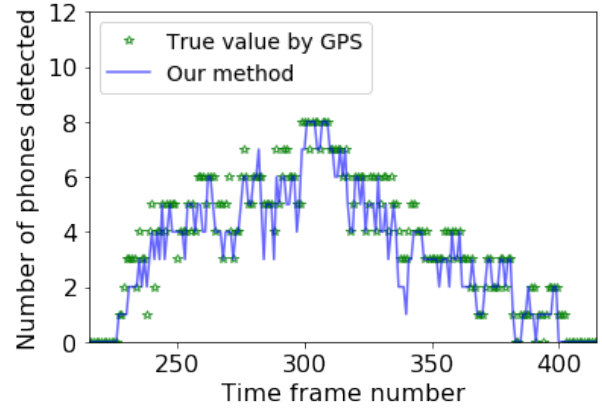


Figure 7: (Left) The location in Jaume University in which measurements were taken. We apply crowd density estimation in the sub-building bounded by red box; (Right) Performance of our method w.r.t. ground truth provided by the GPS locations of phones.

5.4 Analysis under concert crowd scenario

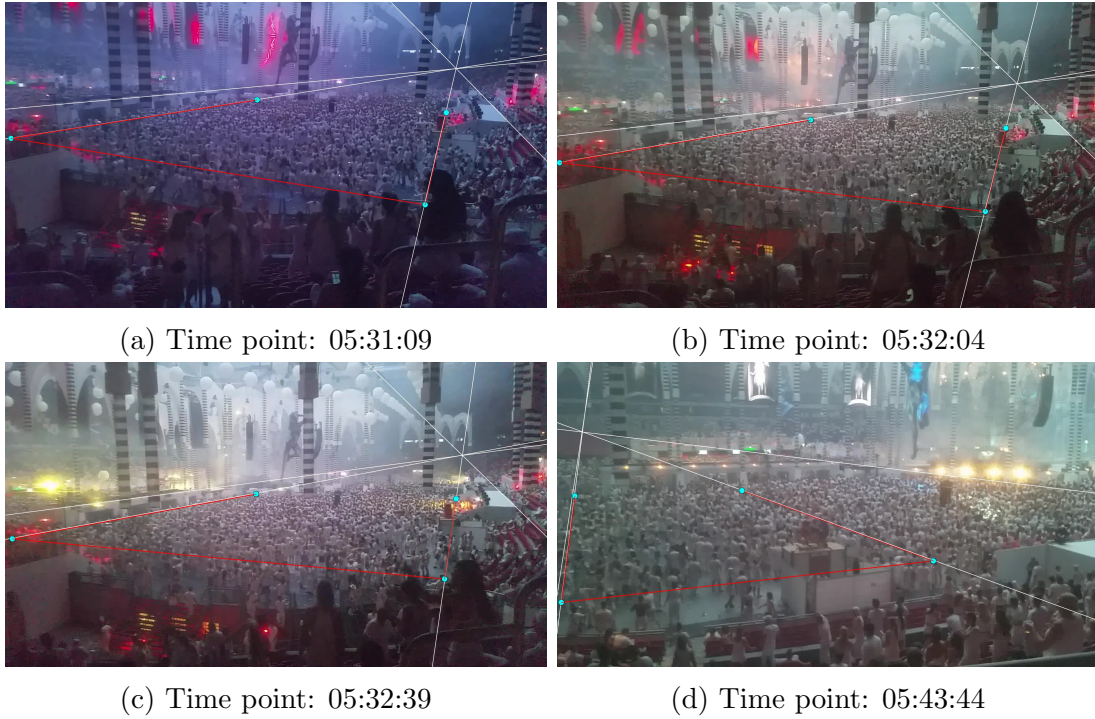


Figure 8: Overview of video frames used for manually counting people (all time points are +2:00 UTC at July 5, 2015). The quadrilaterals are used to relate points in the image to known spatial reference points. People are counted by manually clicking on their heads, using simple computer scripts to keep track of the number of mouse-clicks. Then people’s coordinates are mapped from the image to the Wi-Fi measurement coordinate system. Videos and timestamps are courtesy of Jessey Helslijnen.

To check how our method performs on the Sensation dataset we used video data posted online by visitors (security cameras are focused on detecting fire and are thus very

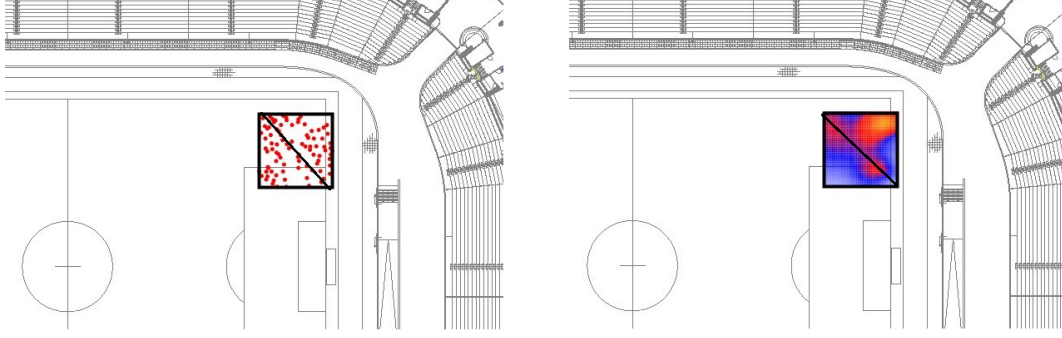


Figure 9: Visualization of (left) manual people counts, and (right) the WiFi-based crowd density estimate, both within the comparison region (upper triangle), at time point 05:32:04 (+2:00 UTC) (see also Figure 8).

sensitive to red light but not good enough for counting people). We have video frames available from the most interesting moment, towards the end of the concert, where the crowd size drops significantly in a short period of 15 minutes due to people leaving. From this material we extracted four time points from which counting could be done (see Figure 8 for an overview).

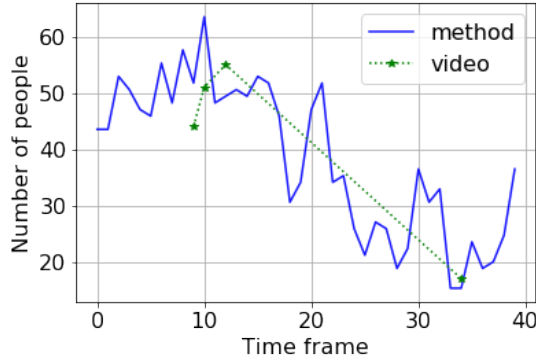


Figure 10: Performances of our method w.r.t. video based counting in a $112.5m^2$ near the main stadium exit, last 15 minutes of the concert.

Based on the frames selected from the video material we manually create people counts. Using multiple spatial reference points people's locations are projected from the perspective image to the 2D-coordinate system of the Wi-Fi measurements. We compare the manual people counts to our Wi-Fi based estimates on a $122.5m^2$ region R that is an intersection of the region covered by Wi-Fi and the region covered by video (the upper triangle in the $15m \times 15m$ square of Figure 9). The region R is located on the football field. At the center of the field the DJ stage was positioned. We used time window of 40s and memory 0 as discussed in Section 5.2.2. The time step is 30s. The results of estimation via the method and the video counts through time are given in Figure 10.

6 Comparison to related work

In the Introduction we mentioned the benefits of using smart phones data over video based approaches for density estimation of indoor concert crowd; in fact, it is our opinion that the two approaches complement each other and in the future we plan to integrate both techniques in real time. Thus, in this section we focus on previous work that estimates crowd density using wireless technologies.

A number of approaches [6, 7, 44] estimate crowd density based on variations of the received signal strength indicator (RSSI) values of a Wi-Fi network. Under controlled experiments they observe that the more people (obstacles) are present, the greater the RSSI variations. Fadhlullah and Ismail (2016) [6] apply analysis of variance, Yuan *et al.* (2011) [7] apply k-means clustering to obtain clusters of similar crowd density based on similar RSSI variations, while Yoshida *et al.* (2016) [44] apply linear and support vector machines regression. Our work also deals with the fact that greater crowd leads to greater RSSI variation (represented by the thickness of the rings in Figure 2 - right). However, with our method the error (or variance) of estimation of crowd density decreases as the (indoor) crowd increases, whereas the variance and thus error of estimation of crowd density in the above approaches increases as the crowd increases. Having a decreasing variance is essential for being able to detect dangerous crowd density.

Other approaches rely on assumption that pedestrians move from point A to point B to estimate crowd density. More concretely, in Wirz *et al.* (2013) [8] the authors follow a participatory sensing approach in which pedestrians share their GPS locations on a voluntary basis. Since only a fraction of all pedestrians share location information, they infer the crowd density from the walking speed, based on the assumption that the maximal walking speed of pedestrians depends on the crowd density (and thus they assume that the crowd tends to reach a certain destination). A participatory sensing approach is also followed by Anzengruber *et al.* (2013) [9]. They use time series to predict mobility patterns in crowds of spectators, and related to the event agenda over time. Schauer *et al.* (2014) [10] focus their attention to airport pedestrians, without requiring crowd participation, but exploiting the predetermined direction of movement of passengers. They count unique MAC devices detected with strong signals by two sensors (nodes) at both sides (public and security) of a security check inside a major airport, to estimate pedestrian densities and pedestrian flow. Versichele *et al.* (2012) [11] use Bluetooth scanners at strategic locations during 10-day festivities, to analyze spatio-temporal dynamics of pedestrians. Their methodology is proximity-based, which is suitable under mobility assumption. Delafontaine *et al.* (2012) [12] apply sequence alignment methods for the extraction of behavioural patterns within Bluetooth tracking data. Higuchi *et al.* (2014) use a participation based approach to estimate the number of people and make advantage of the fact that people move in groups to correct the estimations of individual traces.

Other work uses additional devices distributed in the crowd to improve the density estimation. Weppner *et al.* (2013) [45, 13] estimate crowd densities by distributing volunteers in the crowd, who are carrying smart phones scanning for Bluetooth devices. The authors then use statistics to combine the different measurements in space and time. A recent non-participatory approach based on Wi-Fi fingerprinting is given by [14]. This approach proposes an online training phase('dynamic fingerprinting') in addition to the

offline training phase, which allows for the localization to use the current environmental settings to update the fingerprints database. This requires distributing Wi-Fi devices among the crowd to capture the latest RSS values, which however does not apply to our case of high density crowd in the playfield of a football stadium.

Other participation based approaches include the following. Li *et al.* (2015) use neural networks to learn the relationship between RSS and the number of people (similarly to using WiFi fingerprinting for estimating individual locations). Martella *et al.* [46] deploy a participation-based visitors positioning system for a museum. Some visitors wear sensor bracelets, but there are also sensors distributed across the museum. For every visitor a (discrete) probability distribution over all possible locations is maintained, after determining the most likely floor. The distribution is a weighted average of the neighboring sensors distributions, the weights corresponding to the signal strengths. Then the visitor is localized by computing the average of its spatial probability distribution. Note that, unlike the present paper, this approach implicitly assumes uni-modal spatial probability distribution. On another related note, the localization in [46] is more precise when there are more visitors wearing sensors. In our case data is collected from a fixed number of sensors; that is, our increase of precision with increased number of people is not related to increased number of sensors.

We summarize the added values of our method over previous work for estimating crowd density using wireless technologies as follows.

1. Our method does not require participation from the crowd;
2. It does not assume that visitors are moving in any particular direction;
3. It does not require extra hardware in addition to the available access points;
4. It does not assume existence of a global optimum in the localization procedure;
5. To the best of our knowledge, our method addresses for the first time the ambiguity problem in Wi-Fi localization in the context of crowd density estimation;
6. To the best of our knowledge, we address for the first time the MAC address randomization while estimating crowd size based on Wi-Fi technologies;
7. The estimation of crowd density with our approach increases with the increase of the crowd size (without relying on participation from the crowd), which is an essential property for being able to detect critically raised crowd density. To the best of our knowledge, this property has not been addressed or shown before.

7 Conclusion

We proposed a new method for estimating indoor crowd density based on wireless technologies. Our method does not rely on participation or mobility of the crowd but rather uses a big data analytics approach. We addressed three known challenges: 1) ambiguity of localization procedure due to noisy RSS values, 2) MAC address randomization when a device is in a probing mode, and 3) the irregularity of the packet interarrival times. We used probabilistic models to address (1) and (2) and a memory based model to address

(3). We showed formally that the error of our estimation tends to zero as the crowd size increases (which is essential for disaster prevention), even in case when the locations of visitors are correlated as in groups of friends. We used data-driven stochastic simulations to evaluate quantitatively the effectiveness of our method for highly dense crowds, and we used two datasets to evaluate the performances on real scenarios. Finally, we positioned our work in the context of previous related work and showed the added values of our approach. To the best of our knowledge, the approach presented here is the first to address the ambiguity and MAC randomization problems in context of no-participatory and no-mobility assumption, and also the first that has effectiveness at high crowd density as one of its design principles and results.

8 Declarations

8.1 Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

8.2 Consent for publication

Not applicable

8.3 Availability of data and materials

By the Dutch law for privacy protection [21] we are not allowed to reveal data from Sensation about the individual devices (even if they are anonymized), but we are allowed to reveal aggregated results about the crowd. The dataset used in Section 5.3 is available at <http://indoorlocplatform.uji.es/databases/get/1/>. All software related to the research results presented in this paper can be found in [22] (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.592479>). Latest version of the software is available at: <https://github.com/ArenA-Crowds/Crowds>.

8.4 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

8.5 Funding

The project has been funded by the Netherlands eScience Center.

8.6 Authors' contributions

The authors contributed to the research and manuscript with the order they appear, the last author being also the project principal investigator. All authors discussed the final results as well as read, improved, and approved the final manuscript. In particular, SG drafted the main ideas of the proposed solution, and wrote/performed the work presented in sections 1, 2.2.2, 3, 4.1 (creating statistical ensembles), 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6 and

7. PR implemented the proposed method and wrote sections 2.2.1, 4.1 (Computing individual probability distributions) and, jointly with SG, 5.4. JA wrote Section 2.1. RB and BdV performed experiments and discussed the simulation strategy jointly with SG. All authors actively participated in discussions also in the research phase.

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