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Photography — Electronic still picture imaging — Resolution and spatial frequency responses

Photographie — Imagerie des prises de vues électroniques — Résolution et réponses en fréquence spatiale

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Foreword

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For an explanation on the meaning of ISO specific terms and expressions related to conformity assessment, as well as information about ISO's adherence to the WTO principles in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) see the following URL: Foreword - Supplementary information

The committee responsible for this document is ISO/TC 42, *Photography*.

This second edition cancels and replaces the first edition (ISO 12233:2000), which has been technically revised.

Introduction

0.1 Purpose

The spatial resolution capability is an important attribute of an electronic still-picture camera. Resolution measurement standards allow users to compare and verify spatial resolution measurements. This International Standard defines terminology, test charts, and test methods for performing resolution measurements for analog and digital electronic still-picture cameras.

0.2 Technical background

For consumer digital cameras, the term *resolution* is often incorrectly interpreted as the number of addressable photoelements. While there are existing protocols for determining camera pixel counts, these should not be confused with the interpretation of resolution as addressed in this International Standard. Qualitatively, resolution is the ability of a camera to optically capture finely spaced detail, and is usually reported as a single valued metric. Spatial frequency response (SFR) is a multi-valued metric that measures contrast loss as a function of spatial frequency. Generally, contrast decreases as a function of spatial frequency to a level where detail is no longer visually resolved. This limiting frequency value is the resolution of the camera. A camera's resolution and its SFR are determined by a number of factors. These include, but are not limited to, the performance of the camera lens, the number of addressable photoelements in the optical imaging device, and the electrical circuits in the camera, which can include image compression and gamma correction functions.

While resolution and SFR are related metrics, their difference lies in their comprehensiveness and utility. As articulated in this International Standard, resolution is a single frequency parameter that indicates whether the output signal contains a minimum threshold of detail information for visual detection. In other words, resolution is the highest spatial frequency that a candidate camera can usefully capture under cited conditions. It can be very valuable for rapid manufacturing testing, quality control monitoring, or for providing a simple metric that can be easily understood by end users. The algorithm used to determine resolution has been tested with visual experiments using human observers and correlates well with their estimation of high frequency detail loss.

SFR is a numerical description of how contrast is changed by a camera as a function of the spatial frequencies that describe the contrast. It is very beneficial for engineering, diagnostic, and image evaluation purposes and serves as an umbrella function from which such metrics as sharpness and acutance are derived. Often, practitioners will select the spatial frequency associated with a specified SFR level as a modified non-visual resolution value.

In a departure from the first edition of this International Standard, two SFR measurements are described. Additionally, the first SFR metrology method, edge-based spatial frequency response, is identical to that described in the first edition, except that a lower contrast edge is used for the test chart. Regions of interest (ROI) near slanted vertical and horizontal edges are digitized and used to compute the SFR levels. The use of a slanted edge allows the edge gradient to be measured at many phases relative to the image sensor photoelements and to yield a phase-averaged SFR response.

A second sine wave-based SFR metrology technique is introduced in this edition. Using a sine wave modulated target in a polar format (e.g. Siemens star), it is intended to provide an SFR response that is more resilient to ill-behaved spatial frequency signatures introduced by the image content driven processing of consumer digital cameras. In this sense, it is intended to enable easier interpretation of SFR levels from such camera sources. Comparing the results of the edge-based SFR and the sine based SFR might indicate the extent to which nonlinear processing is used.

The first step in determining visual resolution or SFR is to capture an image of a suitable test chart with the camera under test. The test chart should include features of sufficiently fine detail and frequency content such as edges, lines, square waves, or sine wave patterns. The test chart defined in this International Standard has been designed specifically to evaluate electronic still-picture cameras. It has not necessarily been designed to evaluate other electronic imaging equipment such as input scanners, CRT displays, hard-copy printers, or electro-photographic copiers, nor individual components of an electronic still-picture camera, such as the lens.

Some of the measurements described in this International Standard are performed using digital analysis techniques. They are also applicable with the analogue outputs of the camera by digitizing the analogue signals if there is adequate digitizing equipment.

0.3 Methods for measuring SFR and resolution — selection rationale and guidance

This section is intended to provide more detailed rationale and guidance for the selection of the different resolution metrology methods presented in this International Standard. While resolution metrology of analog optical systems, by way of spatial frequency response, is well established and largely consistent between methodologies (e.g. sine waves, lines, edges), metrology data for such systems is normally captured under well controlled conditions where the required data linearity and spatial isotropy assumptions hold. Generally, it is not safe to assume these conditions for files from many digital cameras, even under laboratory capture environments. Exposure and image content dependent image processing of the digital image file before it is provided as a finished file to the user prevents this. This processing yields different SFR responses depending on the features in the scene or in the case of this International Standard, the target. For instance, in-camera edge detection algorithms might specifically operate on edge features and selectively enhance or blur them based on complex nonlinear decision rules. Depending on the intent, these algorithms might also be tuned differently for repetitive scene features such as those found in sine waves or bar pattern targets. Even for constrained camera settings recommended in this International Standard, these nonlinear operators can yield differing SFR results depending on the target feature set. Naturally, this causes confusion on which targets to use, either alone or in combination. Guidelines for selection are offered below.

Edges are common features in naturally occurring scenes. They also tend to act as visual acuity cues by which image quality is judged and imaging artefacts are manifested. This logic prescribed their use for SFR metrology in the past and current editions of this International Standard. It is also why edge features are prone to image processing in many consumer digital cameras: they are visually important. All other imaging conditions being equal, camera SFRs using different target contrast edge features can be significantly different, especially with respect to their morphology. This is largely due to nonlinear image processing operators and would not occur for strictly linear imaging systems. To moderate this behaviour, a lower contrast slanted edge feature (Figure C.1) was chosen to replace the higher contrast version of the first edition. This feature choice still allows for acuity-amenable SFR results beyond the half-sampling frequency and helps prevent nonlinear data clipping that can occur with high contrast target features. It is also a more reliable rendering of visually important contrast levels in naturally occurring scenes.

Sine wave features have long been the choice for directly calculating SFR of analogue imaging systems and they are intuitively satisfying. They have been introduced into this edition of this International Standard based on experiences from the edge-based approach. Because sine waves transition more slowly than edges, they are not prone to being identified as edges in embedded camera processors. As such, the ambiguity that image processing imposes on the SFR can be largely avoided by their use. Alternatively, if the image processing is influenced by the absence of sharp features, more aggressive processing might be used by the camera. A sine wave starburst test pattern (Figure 6) is adopted in this edition. With the appropriate analysis software, a sine wave-based SFR can be calculated up to the half-sampling frequency. For the same reasons stated above, the sine wave-based target is also of low contrast and consistent with that of the edge-based version. An added benefit of the target’s design over other sine targets is its compactness and bi-directional features.

All experience suggests that there is no single SFR for today’s digital cameras. Even under the strict capture constraints suggested in this International Standard, the allowable feature sets that most digital cameras offer prevent such unique characterization. Confusion can be reduced through complete documentation of the capture conditions and camera setting for which the SFR was calculated. It has been suggested that comparing edge- and sine wave-based SFR results under the same capture conditions could be a good tool in assessing the contribution of spatial image processing in digital cameras.

Finally, at times, a full SFR characterization is simply not required, such as in end of line camera assembly testing. Alternately, SFR might be an intimidating obstacle to those not trained in its utility. For those in need of a simple and intuitive space domain approach to resolution using repeating line patterns, a visual resolution metric is also provided in this second edition of this International Standard.

With such a variety of methods available for measuring resolution, there are bound to be differences in measured resolution results. To benchmark the likely variations, the committee has published the results of a pilot study using all of the proposed techniques and how they relate to each other. These results are provided in Reference [20].