Ink Relocation for Color Halftones[1]

Doron Shaked[2*], Nur Arad[3*], Andrew Fitzhugh[4†], and Irwin Sobel[5†]
[*]Hewlett Packard Laboratories Israel, [†]Hewlett Packard Laboratories Palo Alto

Abstract

Current methodologies for color image halftoning produce prominent halftoning noise. In this paper we argue that brightness variation between color dots placed at neighboring locations is a major cause of color halftone noise. To correct this flaw we propose *Ink Relocation*, a postprocess to arbitrary color halftoning algorithms. The proposed postprocess relocates ink drops between neighboring drop locations in order to reduce local brightness variation.

Introduction

Halftone algorithms are carefully designed to reduce visible artifacts. One of the most important factors producing those artifacts is the variation in the brightness of the dots. In monochrome (*Black* and *White*) halftones, this factor cannot be mitigated. Current color halftoning algorithms are usually Cartesian products of three halftoned monochrome planes corresponding to the color components of the image [8]. This generalization of monochrome algorithms overlooks the fact that colored dots are not equally bright.

To produce a good color halftone one has to place colored dots so that the following criteria are optimally met: (1) The placement pattern is visually unnoticeable. (2) The local average color is the desired one. (3) The colors used reduce the noticeability of the pattern. The first two design criteria are easily carried over from monochrome algorithms. However, the third cannot be satisfied by a simple Cartesian product generalization of monochrome halftoning.

Take, for example, a solid patch of 50% *Gray*. Suppose some dot pattern (e.g., checkerboard) is selected. The patch could be equally rendered with *Black* and *White* dots as with *Blue* and *Yellow*, *Red* and *Cyan*, or *Green* and *Magenta* dots. The color of the halftoned patch will, theoretically, be the same in all cases. The noise effect, however, will be different, *Green* and *Magenta* being almost equally bright, in contrast to, for example, *Black* and *White*. Similar arguments may be found in [3], [4], [5], and [7].

In the next section the additional color criterion is formulated in practical terms by examining the case of rendering arbitrary solid color patches. The third section presents *Ink Relocation*, a postprocess that transforms arbitrary halftones to halftones conforming to the new color design criterion. In the last section Ink Relocation examples are presented and discussed.

The Minimal Brightness Variation Criterion

In this section we formulate the color design criterion in more concrete terms. To this end we analyze it in a special case of rendering large patches of arbitrary solid colors. Given a color in the *RGB* cube, it may be rendered using the 8 basic colors located at the vertices of the *RGB* cube. Actually, any particular color may be rendered using no more than 4 colors (in a linear color space, any color-quadruple whose convex hull contains the desired color will do). The issue raised in this section is: Suppose we want to print a patch of solid color, what halftones should we use? This question has been raised before (see for example [3], [4], [5], and [7]), though mainly as an example of how bad things can be (e.g. specifying halftones that are not appropriate for some colors). The following criterion gives this question a full answer.

Consider the basic rationale of halftoning: When presented with high frequency patterns, the human visual system "applies" a low-pass filter and perceives only their average. Current inkjet printing resolution can still be resolved by the human visual system, thus still higher resolutions might have to be achieved. Relevant to the problem at hand is the fact that the human visual system is more sensitive to changes in brightness than to changes in the chrominance, which average at much lower frequencies. Thus we arrive at the following formulation of the third criterion:

> **The Minimal Brightness Variation Criterion (MBVC):**
> To reduce halftone noise, select from within all color sets by which the desired color may be rendered, the one whose brightness variation is minimal

There are several standard "visually uniform" color spaces, and standard color difference measures [6]. The

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[2] HP Labs Israel, Technion City, Haifa 32000, Israel. dorons@hp.technion.ac.il
[3] Current address: Orbotech, P.O.B. 215, Yavne, 81102, Israel. nur@orbotech.co.il
[4] Current address: Hewlett-Packard Internet Imaging Operation. fitzhugh@cup.hp.com
[5] HP Labs, 1501 Page Mill Rd. Palo-Alto, Ca. sobel@hpl.hp.com

(MBVC) is not equivalent to choosing the set whose maximal difference measure is minimal. The rational behind our preference of an apparent one-dimensional projection (on the luminance axis) of a more general measure is that the visually uniform color spaces and the resulting color difference measures were developed with large solid color patches in mind, whereas halftone images are high frequency color patterns. Chrominance difference between participating colors plays part. However, due to the stronger low-pass in the chrominance channel, it matters much less than is embodied in the standard color difference formulas. We maintain that at current printing resolution the Minimal Brightness Variation Criterion is a reasonable one.

To consider the brightness variation of color sets we only need to order the eight basic colors on a brightness scale. In color theory [1] the primary colors (*Cyan*, *Magenta*, and *Yellow*), and secondary colors (*Red*, *Green*, and *Blue*) have a specific brightness order: *Blue* is the darkest secondary color, and *Green* the brightest. Their complementary colors *Yellow* (complements *Blue*) is the brightest primary, and *Magenta* (complements *Green*) is the darkest. Hence, we have two color orders: The "dark" colors {*KBRG*}, and the "bright" colors {*MCYW*}. The question is what is the combined brightness order.

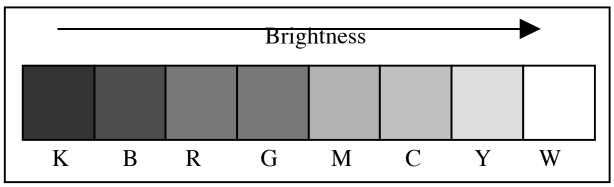

Figure 1: The brightness scale of the eight basic colors rendered using HP inkjet ink.

It would be only natural to assume that the bright colors are always brighter than the dark ones. Indeed, using *HP* inkjet ink this is the case, as can be seen in Figure 1. However, if other inks (or other media for that matter) are used, this may change. For example, colors rendered on a CRT screen have a different brightness order: {*KBRMGCYW*}, in which *Magenta* is darker than *Green*. It is easily seen that this permutation is the only one possible in three-color systems.

The Ink Relocation Postprocess

In this section we introduce the Ink Relocation postprocess to arbitrary color halftone algorithms (e.g. Dithering or Error-Diffusion). Ink Relocation applies the MBVC to arbitrary color halftones, so that the realization of the first two design criteria embodied in the original halftoning algorithm is minimally interfered with.

Since we try to stick to the dot placement pattern of the original halftoning algorithm, we limit Ink Relocation's radius of influence to the minimum. The smallest digital neighborhood is a set of two adjacent pixels. Since we also need to maintain the local average color we limit Ink Relocation to relocation of ink-drops within sets of 2-pixel neighborhoods.

For example, consider the situation depicted in Figure 2, where two neighboring pixels are rendered *Black* and *White* (we model *Black* as composite *Black* - an overlay of *Cyan*, *Magenta*, and *Yellow*). In such a case, relocating the *Magenta* ink drop from the *Black* location to the empty *White* location constitutes a minimal infringement of the original dot placement pattern, and does not change the average color (50% *Gray*)[6]. The significant effect of the relocation is the reduced brightness variation (from *Black-White* to *Green-Magenta*).

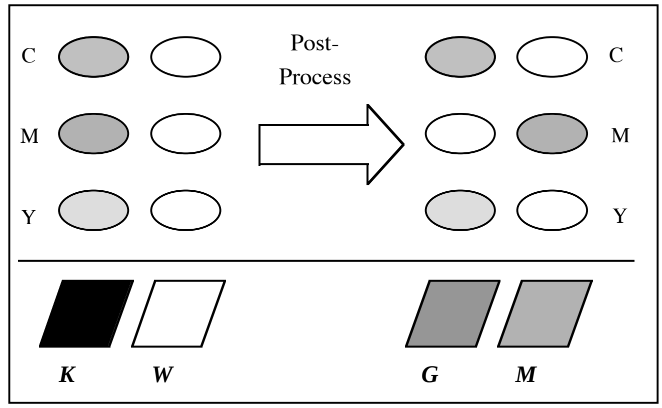

Figure 2: Relocation of the Magenta drop from the composite Black location to the empty White location.

Inspecting 2-pixel halftone neighborhoods, Ink Relocation considers whether the average color of the halftone couple can be rendered with a different halftone couple, whose brightness variation is smaller. It is easily verified that there are only 9 such halftone couples:

Black - White	KW → MG		
Black - Primary	KY→RG	KC→BG	KM→BR
White - Secondary	WB→CM	WR→YM	WG→YC
Complementary	BY→MG	RC→MG	

The 9 relocations amount to relocating single ink drops from high ink-load locations to neighboring low ink-load locations. In some cases, like the example of Figure 2, there are several possible relocations. The rules that were used to create the above table were: 1. The resulting halftone couple should have the minimal possible brightness variation 2. It should preserve the brightness gradient direction.

In the Ink Relocation postprocess, each pixel is sequentially compared to 4 of its immediate neighbors, as in Figure 3. The more general 8-neighborhood case can probably yield slightly better results, but was, nevertheless, ruled out because of computational considerations.

[6] This is true only in a linear color space. In practice neither dot combinations is a true 50% *Gray*, and the average color is not identical. Standard tone correction should be applied to correct for this illinearity.

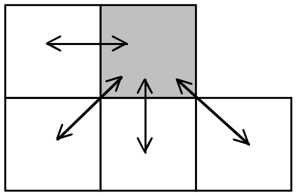

Figure 3: The neighborhood for Ink Relocation.

Figure 4 depicts the application of Ink Relocation to the output of two different halftoning algorithms (ordered dither and Error-Diffusion). In both cases the dot placement characteristics are preserved, as well as the average color, while brightness variation is reduced significantly. Be aware that Figure 4 is a monochrome rendering of a color image.

Results and Discussion

We would have concluded with a few Ink Relocation examples, however, since the proceedings are printed in monochrome, and we were not ready for mass production of color inserts, we will only describe the results. A colorful version of this paper including color images is available, on request, from the first author.

In the color version of this paper we presents four samples of an image using 8x8 Bayer-dither, Bayer-dither + Ink Relocation, Error-Diffusion, and Error-Diffusion + Ink Relocation. Following is a summary of the authors' impression from the color figures:

- The most dominant impression from the color figures is the improvement of halftone quality, and the reduction in halftone noise due to the Ink Relocation postprocess.
- There are no free lunches: Reduced brightness variation is paid for by increased chrominance variation. However, as mentioned in the introduction, this trade off is usually favorable, since chrominance variation is less disturbing than brightness variation.
- Postprocessing of ordered dither halftones produces some disturbing artifacts. Those occur probably because of the interplay of the ordered dither with the structured postprocess (the four neighbors in Figure 3 are visited in the same order). It may be possible to solve this problem if some randomization is introduced.
- An interesting byproduct of Ink Relocation is that colors are intrinsically more saturated (see especially the ordered dither example in Figure 5(a)-(b)). This phenomenon is, again, dependent on the various rendering details (printer, media, etc.). Improved color saturation should be expected because in Ink Relocation neutral dots (**K** and **W**) are discarded, in favor of saturated dots (**R**, **G**, **B**, **C**, **M**, or **Y**). Thus colors appear far from the neutral (*Gray*).

It is interesting to note that similar claims about the colorfulness of "dull" tones had been made by the Neo-Impressionists more than a century ago [2]. Georges Seurat (1859-1891) an artist and art theoretician, developed his theories on pointillism (as an artistic method) at the dawn of color printing. Amongst others, he maintained that in order to render the effects of natural light and shadow, one has to apply dot combinations of complementary colors, rather than combinations involving *Black* and *White*. In fact, he and his followers banned *Black* from their pallet altogether.

- Ink Relocation is essentially a smoothing process. A relocated ink dot moves typically a single location, and may move up to two locations. Blurring effects are usually less disturbing than expected because of the edge enhancement implicit in halftone noise reduction. Nevertheless, blur can be noted at strong edges, where tone differences at the edge cause prominent ink relocation across it. The blur could be prevented if edges were detected, and Ink Relocation over them suppressed. Disabling the post-process over edges does not reduce the positive effect of Ink Relocation, which was designed to improve mainly the rendering of smooth areas. It is however important to note that the proposed blur reduction requires access to the original color values or the employment of a good inverse halftoning algorithm.

In this paper we have presented the MBVC and its application as a postprocess to halftoning algorithms. It should however be noted that the MBVC could be incorporated into halftoning processes.

Acknowledgment:

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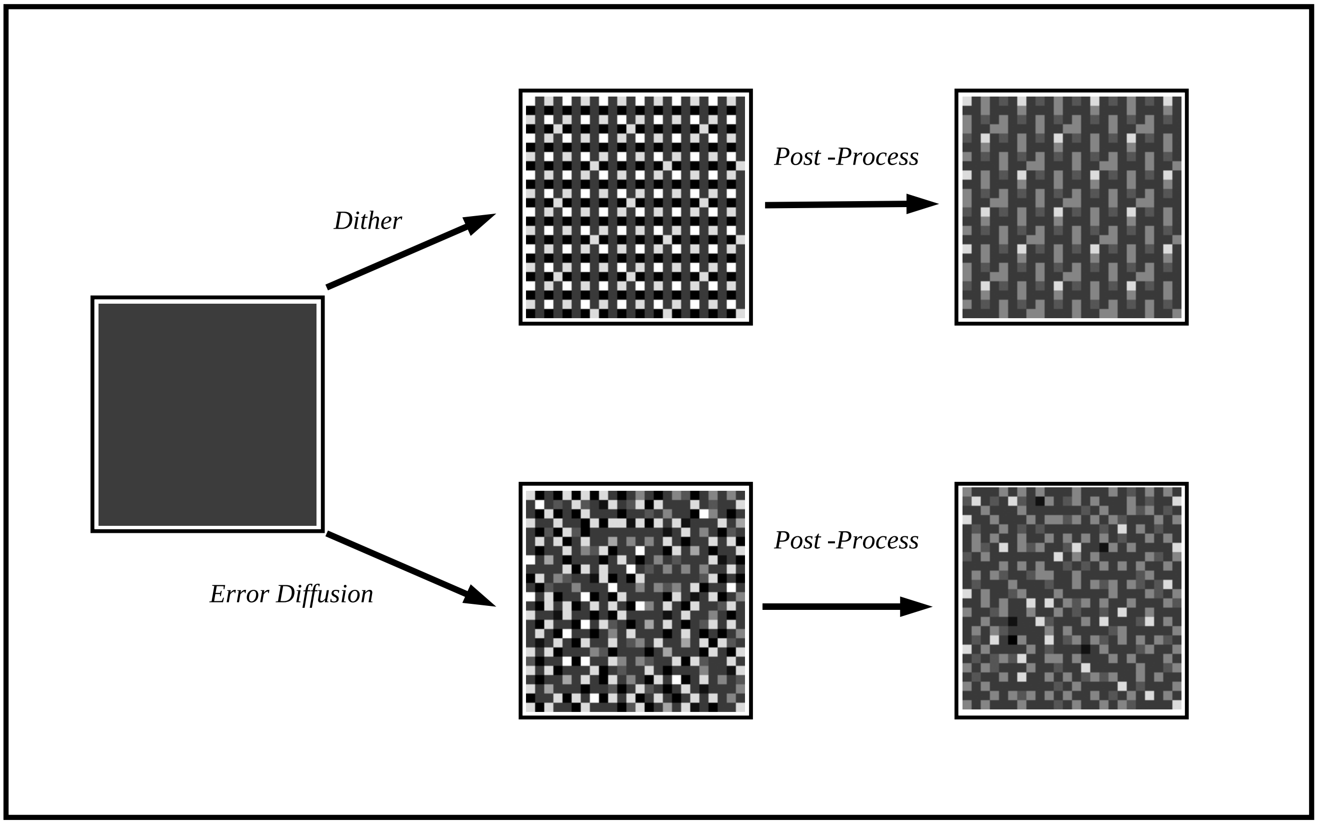

Figure 4: Example of the Ink Relocation postprocess, applied to a patch of solid color (monochrome of an original color figure).

This paper may be better appreciated in color.

A color version of this paper including color image samples is available, on request, from the first author.