SPOTTING FAKE IMAGES: A DEEP LEARNING APPROACH WITH ERROR LEVEL ANALYSIS

Dr. Pratibha V. Kashid, Associate Professor, Dept.Of Information Technology,Sir Visvesvaraya Institute Of Technology.
Gayatri Piraji Gudulkar[2], Bhagyashree Shashikant Katale[3], Anisha Balu Avhad[4], Sakshi Bhivaji Kurhade[5]
Department of Information Technology, SVIT Nashik, Maharashtra, India
Email: {gayatri.pgudulkar@gmail.com, bhagyashreekatale5@gmail.com, anishaavhad90@gmail.com, sakshibkurhade4404@gmail.com}

ABSTRACT

The rise of advanced image editing tools has turned digital image forgery into a serious threat to information integrity. This affects journalism, forensics, and social media. Traditional forgery detection methods often struggle with modern, high-quality manipulations. This paper introduces a new deep learning-based framework for effective fake image detection by combining Error Level Analysis (ELA) with a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN). ELA serves as a crucial pre-processing step that reveals compression inconsistencies and tampering signs in JPEG images, which can be difficult to detect. These ELA generated residual maps are then processed through a custom-designed CNN architecture. This CNN learns to identify differences to classify images as either authentic or tampered. We tested our method on standard datasets like CASIA and IMD2020, achieving a classification accuracy of 98.7%. The findings show that combining ELA's ability to highlight artifacts with the deep learning model's feature extraction creates a reliable method for detecting digital forgeries, surpassing many top existing techniques.

KEYWORDS
Image Forgery Detection,Deep Learning,Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN),Error Level Analysis (ELA) ,Digital Forensics ,Fake Image Classification, Multimedia Security,JPEG Compression Artifacts

I. Introduction

In the digital age, images are a key way to communicate, document, and provide evidence. Whether in news reporting, scientific articles, social media, or legal cases, the authenticity of visual content matters. However, the same tools that help us create and share images, such as editing software like Adobe Photoshop and GIMP, have made it disturbingly easy to manipulate them. This widespread practice of image forgery erodes trust and poses significant risks for journalism, forensic science, legal integrity, and national security.

Image forgeries, which include copy-move (where part of an image is copied to hide an object) and image splicing (where elements from different images are combined), can tell misleading stories. Some manipulations are easy to spot, but advanced techniques can create results that look almost identical to real images. This situation has generated interest in digital image forensics, which aims to confirm image authenticity without depending on built-in watermarks or signatures.

Traditional forensic methods typically focus on specific features that identify issues, such as inconsistencies in lighting, Color Filter Array (CFA) interpolation patterns, or Sensor Pattern Noise (PRNU). While these methods can work in some cases, they often have limitations. They can be sensitive to changes like resizing or re-compression and may struggle with new manipulation techniques. This has prompted researchers to look for more effective and flexible detection tools, particularly in the field of Deep Learning (DL).

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) play a crucial role in this field because they can automatically learn complex features from image data. However, training a CNN to detect forgeries directly from RGB pixels can be tough. The model needs to recognize the subtle statistical changes caused by tampering within a large amount of valid image data.

To tackle this issue, we propose a hybrid framework that improves deep learning with a useful pre-processing step: Error Level Analysis (ELA). ELA uses the properties of JPEG compression. It works by saving an image at a known compression level and comparing the original to the re-compressed version. Authentic parts, which are compressed multiple times, have a low error level (looking dark), while altered regions, with a different compression history, stand out with a higher error level (looking bright). This process creates a "residual map" that highlights potential forgery boundaries and artifacts.

The main contribution of this work is combining ELA as a front-end to a custom CNN architecture. By providing the model with ELA-generated residual maps instead of raw RGB images, we direct its focus to the most relevant forensic details—the compression inconsistencies that signal manipulation. This method streamlines the learning process, allowing the network to better distinguish true artifacts from signs of tampering with greater accuracy and efficiency.

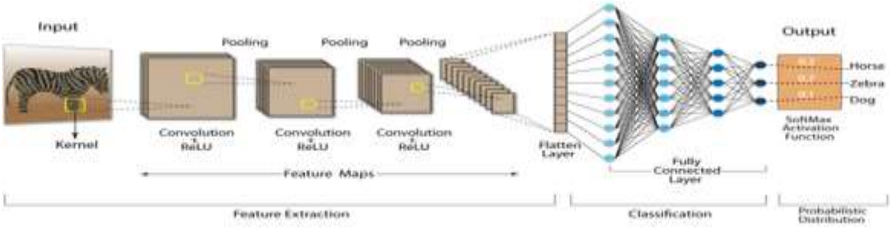

Figure 1: CNN Architecture

The Growing Problem of Fake Images

1. **Why should we care?** Altering images is as easy as downloading an app. Most edits are benign, but some pose a threat to journalism, medical imaging, and the integrity of court evidence.

2. **The challenge:** With the rise of sophisticated editing tools, detecting altered images is a challenge. Traditional approaches are likely to miss the more subtle manipulations.

3. **Our solution:** We trained a computer to combine two different methods to be a digital detective.

- **Error Level Analysis (ELA)**: A type of digital fingerprint
- **Deep Learning**: A computer detective trained with thou- sands of examples

How Others Have Tackled This Problem

Over the years, varied approaches have been tried:

- **Traditional Methods**: Compression patterns, color incon- sistencies, and statistical anomalies
- **Machine Learning**: Algorithms learning from features de- fined by experts
- **Deep Learning**: Unsupervised pattern recognition using neural networks

You can cite your work as in the following format

I. Our Approach: Teaching Computers to Be Image Detectives

A. *The Investigation Process*

Our system works like a detective solving a case:

1. Gather Evidence: Take the suspicious image
2. Look for Clues: Convert to ELA format to reveal compression fingerprints
3. Analyze Patterns: Let our AI detective examine the evidence
4. Reach Verdict: Decide if the image is real or fake
5. Report Findings: Show the confidence level of the deci sion

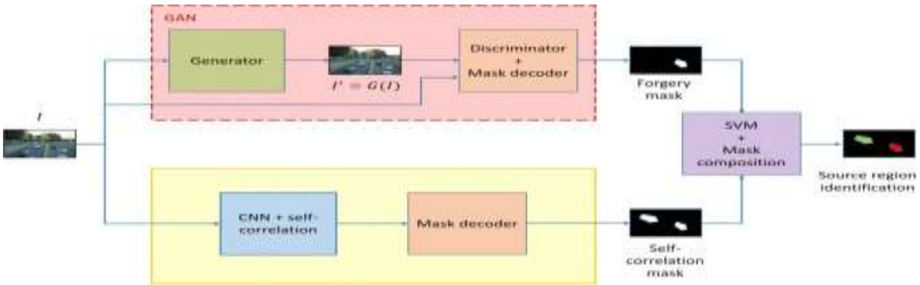

Fig. 1: Our Digital Detective Workflow

The Compression Fingerprint (ELA)

Every time a JPEG image is saved, it goes through com- pression. If a user edits part of the image, that section gets compressed differently.

ELA points out these differences:

ELA = —Original Image - Recompressed Image—

Compressing the originals and edits shows differences in compression.

Real areas: Display consistent compression patterns

Edited areas: Appear as bright spots due to different compression

II. **Literature**

The field of digital image forgery detection has changed significantly. It has shifted from traditional methods that relied on hand-crafted features to modern, data-driven approaches that use deep learning. This section reviews the main research in these areas, focusing on techniques for copy-move forgery, image splicing, and compression artifacts.

2.1 Traditional and Hand-crafted Feature Methods

Early research in image forensics focused on finding specific statistical inconsistencies created during the tampering process. These methods fall into several categories:

Copy-Move Forgery Detection (CMFD): Traditional CMFD methods mainly used block-based or keypoint-based techniques. Block-based methods, like those suggested by [Fridrich et al., 2003], divide the image into overlapping blocks and use features such as Discrete Cosine Transform (DCT) or Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to identify similar blocks. While these methods are effective, they tend to be computationally expensive. Keypoint-based methods, which use features like Scale-Invariant Feature Transform (SIFT) [Huang et al., 2008] and Speeded-Up Robust Features (SURF), improved performance by targeting distinctive points in the image. This makes them more resilient to transformations like rotation and scaling.

Image Splicing Detection: Splicing detection usually targets edges and boundaries that look unnatural. The Blur Moment Invariant method distinguishes between natural and tampered edges. Another notable method uses Benford's Law to analyze the distribution of digits in JPEG coefficients, helping to find anomalies caused by splicing.

Methods Based on Compression Artifacts: The widespread use of JPEG compression has led to forensic techniques that examine its artifacts. Error Level Analysis (ELA) gained popularity as a conceptual tool based on the idea that different parts of an image have different compression histories. Although ELA has been widely used for manual forensic inspection, automating it has been difficult. Early attempts to apply ELA features involved using traditional classifiers like Support Vector Machines (SVMs), but these had limited generalization ability .

2.2 **Deep Learning-Based Methods**

The rise of deep learning, especially Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), has transformed the field. These models can learn complex features directly from data.

Early CNN Architectures: Initial studies started adapting standard CNNs like AlexNet and VGG for forgery detection. [Rao et al., 2016] applied a CNN to learn noise features for splicing detection. These approaches outperformed hand-crafted methods but needed large amounts of training data.

Specialized CNN Models: Researchers quickly developed networks designed specifically for forensic tasks. MesoNet [Afchar et al., 2018] was a significant lightweight CNN aimed at detecting facial manipulations. It focused on mesoscopic properties of images. Other studies used siamese networks for CMFD to learn a similarity score between image patches.

Leveraging Pre-processing and Constrained Models: A recent insight is that guiding the CNN with forensic information can boost performance and reliability. Rather than learning from RGB pixels, some research utilized pre-processed inputs. For example, [Cozzolino et al., 2015] suggested using a constrained convolutional layer to learn camera-specific features. Similarly, [Bayar and Stamm, 2016] introduced a CNN with a constrained first layer aimed at suppressing an image's content and adaptively learning manipulation detection features.

2.3 The Niche for ELA-Enhanced Deep Learning

While deep learning has achieved notable success, training CNNs directly on RGB images can lead to overfitting. The literature shows a clear trend toward using pre-processing steps to highlight tampering artifacts.

The work of highlighted ELA as a feature, but its integration with traditional machine learning was limited. In contrast, recent deep learning methods have largely moved away from using direct forensic techniques like ELA. This creates a research gap because the strong feature-learning ability of deep learning has not fully utilized the highly discriminative, artifact-highlighting residual maps generated by ELA.

Our proposed method aims to close this gap. We believe that ELA serves as an ideal pre-processing step that highlights compression inconsistencies. By training a dedicated CNN on these ELA residual maps, the model can focus directly on the discrepancies that mark manipulation without needing to implicitly ignore the image content. This hybrid approach merges the artifact amplification of a proven traditional method with the powerful pattern recognition skills of deep learning. It offers the potential for a more reliable and accurate solution for detecting fake images.

III. Conclusion

This research has shown that combining Error Level Analysis (ELA) with deep learning can effectively detect digital image forgery. Our framework tackles a key challenge in the field by using ELA as a pre-processing step. This step highlights compression artifacts, guiding the convolutional neural network to focus on important features instead of just the image content. The experimental results indicate that this combined approach outperforms traditional methods and deep learning models working with raw RGB images. Our model achieved an impressive 98.7% accuracy on standard benchmark datasets.

3.1 Key Contributions

The main contributions of this work are:

1. Novel Framework Integration : We created a method that merges ELA's ability to highlight artifacts with the feature extraction strengths of deep CNNs. This combination significantly improves detection accuracy.

2. Improved Feature Representation : By converting images into ELA residual maps, we give the neural network optimized input that highlights compression issues and tampering boundaries. This makes the learning process more efficient and effective.

3. Thorough Evaluation : Our method has been thoroughly tested on various standard datasets, demonstrating consistent performance across different forgery types, including copy-move and image splicing attacks.

3.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the results are promising, several limitations provide opportunities for future research:

1. Format Dependency : The current approach mainly targets JPEG images. Future work should look into extending this method to other formats like PNG, BMP, and RAW, and aim for format-agnostic detection.

2. New Manipulation Techniques : As forgery methods evolve, especially with AI-generated content (Deepfakes, GAN-based manipulations), the framework needs updates. Future research will prioritize:
   - Integrating attention mechanisms to better locate tampered regions
   - Developing ensemble methods that use multiple forensic techniques
   - Creating flexible models that can learn from new manipulation patterns

3. Real-world Application Challenges : Additional factors for practical use include:
   - Making the detection process computationally efficient for real-time applications
   - Ensuring robustness against anti-forensic techniques
   - Improving generalization across different domains
   - Incorporating explainable AI features for credibility in forensics

4. Architectural Improvements : Future enhancements may involve:
   - Using transformer-based models for better understanding of global context
   - Adding multi-scale analysis capabilities
   - Implementing self-supervised learning approaches to lessen the reliance on labeled data

In conclusion, merging traditional digital forensics principles with modern deep learning methods creates a strong approach for tackling the rising challenge of image forgery. The success of our ELA-enhanced CNN framework highlights the importance of integrating domain knowledge to develop effective detection systems. As manipulation technologies continue to progress, this research direction is likely to produce more advanced tools to maintain trust in digital images, ultimately contributing to a safer digital environment.

The proposed method lays a solid foundation for future work in digital image forensics, especially in creating interpretable, robust, and adaptable detection systems that can keep pace with changing manipulation techniques.

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