



Simple and Secure Digital Color Image Steganography

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Abstract:

A simple and secure method of digital color image steganography method will be introduced, the method will hide a digital color image in another image, the covering image will be any type and with any size (the covering image can be smaller than the image to be hidden, thus the capacity of the covering image will be unlimited).

The proposed method will apply image resizing, the resizing factors will form the private key to protect the hidden image from being hacked, this key will provide a good key space to secure the image, the extracted image will be very sensitive to the selected values of the private key components. A simple way of image bits hiding and extracting operation will be used, the image bit matrix will be converted to one column matrix and embedded in the LSBs of the covering bytes using one assignment operation, the LSBs of the stego bytes will be extracted using one operation to create a one column matrix, which will be converted to 8 columns matrix to form the image binary matrix.

The method will be implemented and tested using various covering images and various color images to be hidden. The obtained results will be analyzed to prove the quality, speed and sensitivity of the proposed method.

Keywords: steganography, DCI, covering image, stego image, PK, IBM, resizing, quality, speedup, throughput.

Introduction

Digital color image (DCI) [5-10] is an important data type due to the wide range of computer application requiring this data type. DCI may contain secret information, it may be private or secret, and it requires protection to prevent any hacking attacks [11-15].

One of the easiest techniques used to secure DCI is image steganography [60-73]. DCI steganography as shown in figure 1 means image hiding before sending it via unsecure data network and extracting after receiving from the data network [16-20].

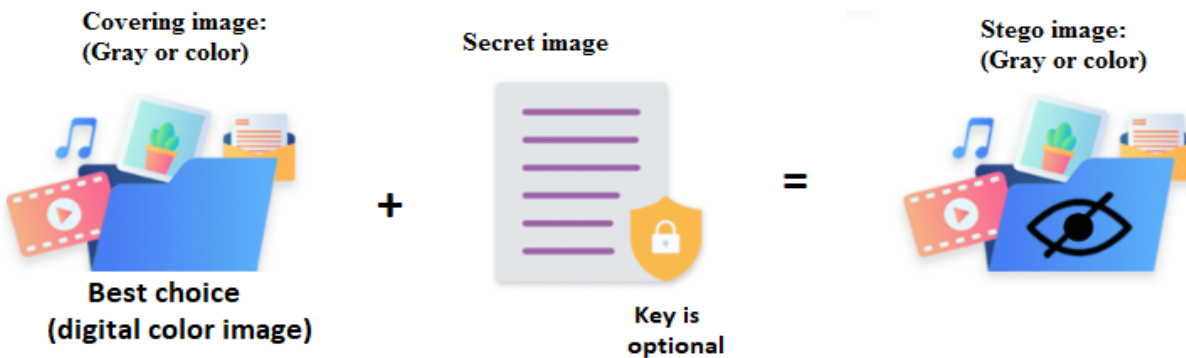


Figure 1: DCI steganography process

DCI steganography must hide the image in another covering image without affecting much the covering image, the stego image must be closed to the covering image and the quality parameters calculated between the covering and the stego images must satisfy the quality requirements of good stego system listed in table 1 [21-26]:

Table 1: Good stego system quality requirements [55-60]

Quality parameter	Value
Mean square error (MSE)	Low
Peak signal to noise ratio (PSNR)	High
Correlation coefficient (CC)	Close to 1
Number of samples change rate (NSCR)	Close to zero

The most popular method used in data steganography is least significant bit (LSB) method [60-73], this method reserves the LSBs of the covering-stego bytes to hide-extract the bits of the hidden data. The capacity hiding of LSB method is limited to the covering image size and it is equal the covering image size divided by 8 [27-30]. The LSBs of the covering image color bytes are to be replaced by the image to be hidden bits as shown in figure 2 and 3.

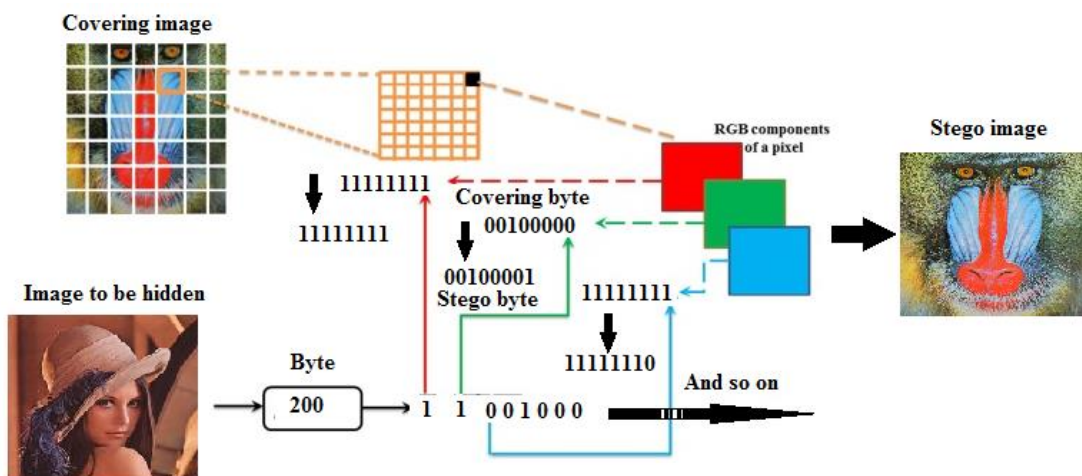


Figure 2: Used LSBs

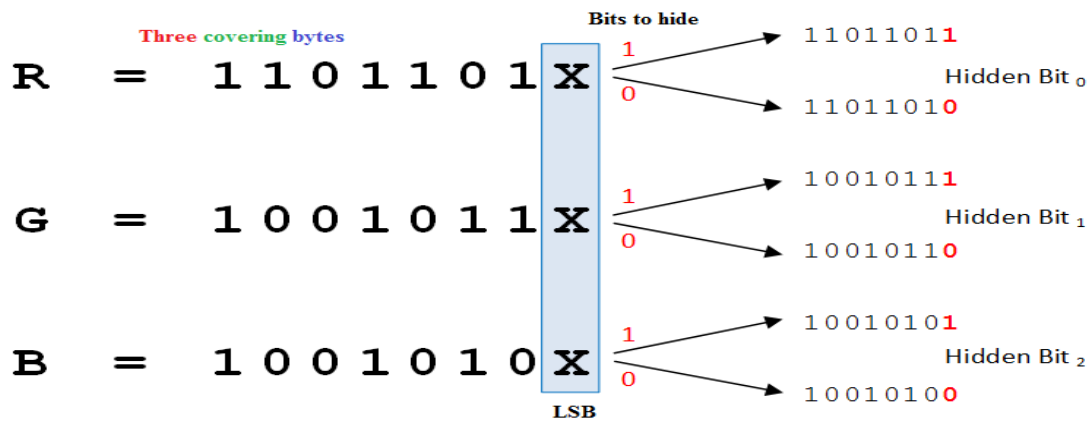


Figure 3: Replacing LSBs by the hidden bits

LSB method assigns a consecutive number of covering bytes to be used for DCI bits hiding, the red byte of the covering bytes is firstly used the green one then the blue byte, the covering bytes are to be converted to binary, the LSBs of these binary number are used for data bits hiding-extracting as shown in figure 4 [31-40].

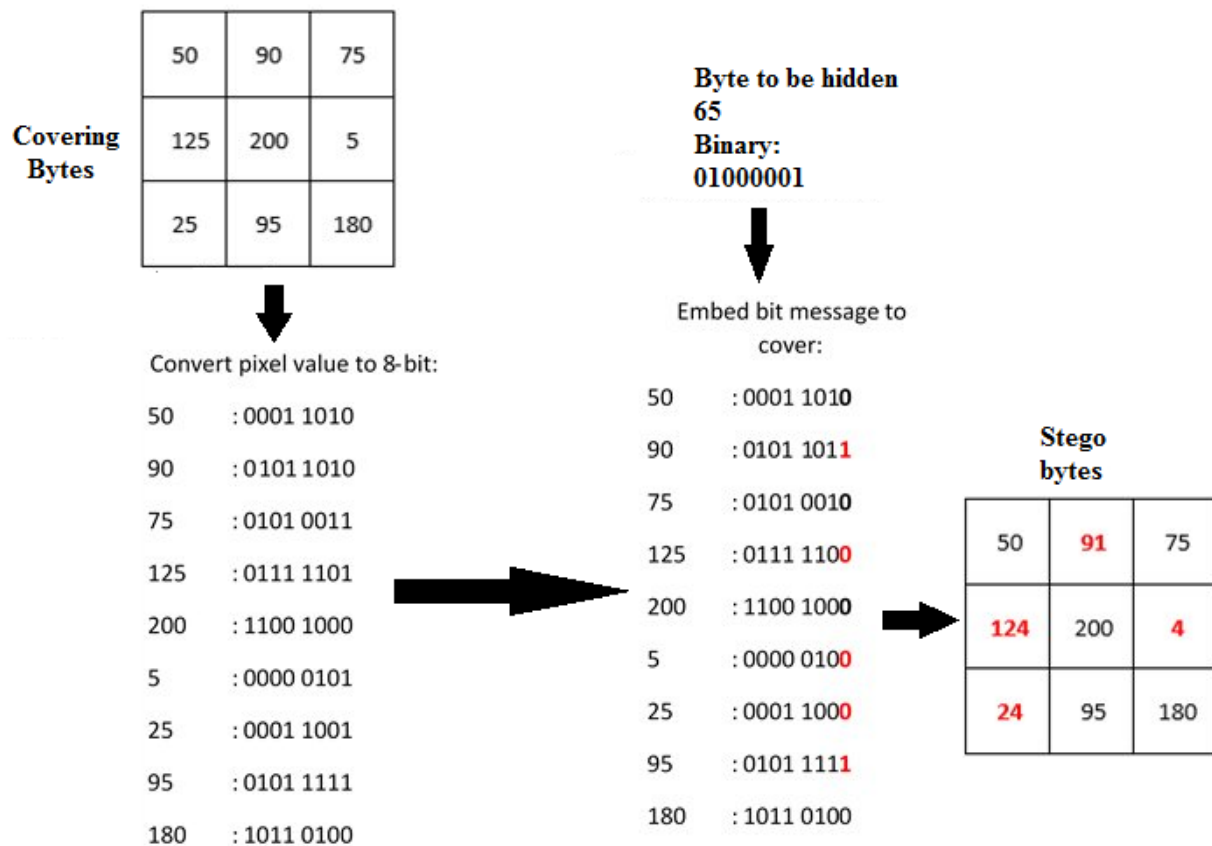


Figure 4: LSB method data hiding

The proposed of this research paper is to introduce a new method of DCI hiding-extracting, which will provide the following enhancement [41-50]:

- Making the hiding capacity unlimited, by resizing the covering image, the size of the DCI to be hidden may be greater than the size of the covering image [51-55].
- Covering image may have any size and any type (gray image or color image).
- The extracting and hiding functions will be simplified, the process of DCI bits hiding will be implemented in batch way by converting the image binary matrix (IBM) to one column matrix, this matrix will replace the LSBs of the covering bytes by performing single assignment operation, the same thing will be applied for the hiding process, the LSBs of the stego bytes will be extracted as one column matrix, then this matrix will be reshaped to 8 columns matrix to form the hidden image IBM. Applying the one operation of hiding and extracting will lead to eliminate the sequence of logical operation used in the hiding and extracting functions used in classical LSB (CLSB) method of image steganography.
- The proposed method will be secure based on using a private key of length equal 192 bits.
- The proposed method will produce a stego image with excellent quality.
- The proposed method will decrease both the hiding and extracting time, it will increase the speed of image steganography, and it will provide a speed up comparing with other existing methods of data steganography.

Many methods based on LSB method [1-4] were introduced, these methods provided a good quality, but the speed of steganography varies from one method to another, the proposed method speed will be compared with CLSB, SLSB, and DSLSB methods, table 2 shows the speed results of these methods:

Table 2: Speed results of some existing methods of data steganography [1-4]

Method	Data length(byte)	HT(second)	ET(second)	HTP(K bytes per second)	ETP(K bytes per second)
CLSB	750	0.062	0.078	5.9767	4.7507
	1000	0.078	0.062	6.3342	7.9689
	1500	0.093	0.109	7.9689	6.7991
Average		0.0777	0.0830	6.7599	6.5062
SLSB	750	2.044	0.073	0.1813	5.0761
	1000	3.338	0.063	0.1480	7.8424
	1500	9.376	0.109	0.0790	6.7991
Average		4.9193	0.0817	0.1361	6.5725
DSLSB	750	0.343	0.078	1.0803	4.7507
	1000	0.592	0.062	0.8346	7.9689
	1500	1.029	0.109	0.7202	6.7991
Average		0.6547	0.0830	0.8784	6.5062

The Proposed Method

The proposed method uses a private key (PK), which contains three components: r n1 and rn2 to define the new dimensions of the resized covering image, and P to define the starting position of the covering-stego bytes. Each component has a double data type, so the address space provided by the PK will be calculated using equation 1, this key space is big enough to resist hacking attacks:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Key space} &= 2^{3 \times 64} \\
 &= 2^{192} \\
 &= 6.2771017353866807638357894232077 \times 10^{57} \quad (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

The hiding process of the proposed method will be implemented applying the following tasks:

- Cover image resizing using n1 and n2 values.
- Hiding the secret DCI.
- Resizing the stego bytes back to its original size [32-38].

The extracting process of the proposed method will be implemented applying the following tasks:

- Stego image resizing using n1 and n2 values.
- Extracting the secret DCI.

Color image resizing is a simple operation; figure 5 illustrate an example of implementing this operation:

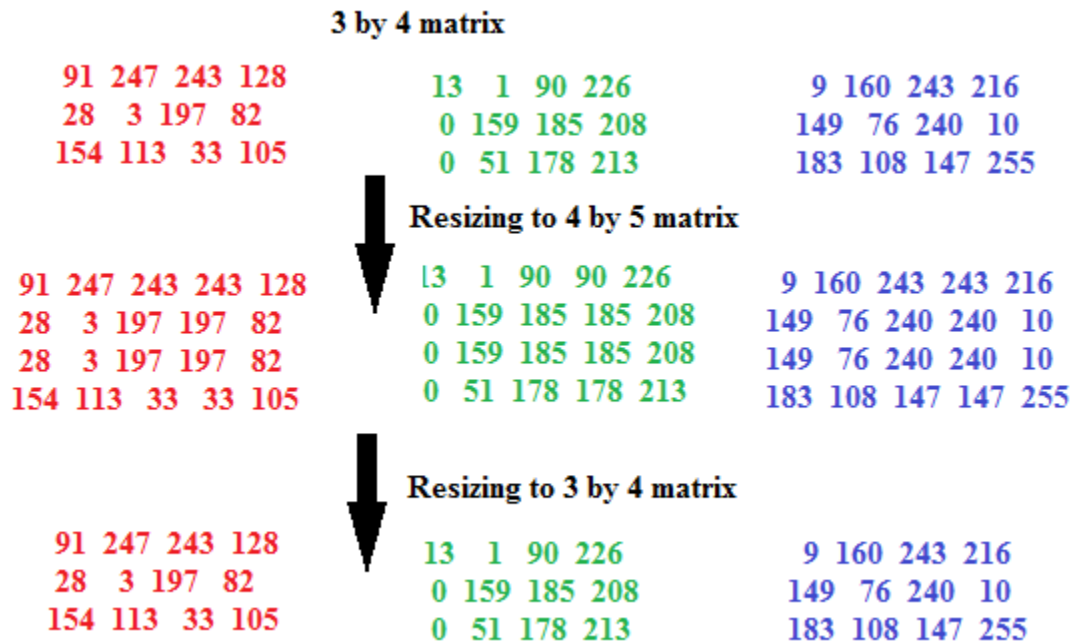


Figure 5: Image resizing example

Using the values of n1 and n2 we can resize the covering image by expanding the image size, and thus expanding the covering image capacity, after hiding DCI the stego image must be resized to its original size. Expanding the image size and reducing the image size by using resizing operations will not affect the covering image, the reduced image will be the same as the source image, this is can be seen in the following example. Figures 6, 7 and 8 show that the reduced image is the same as the source image (the quality parameters calculated between them prove that these two images are the same).

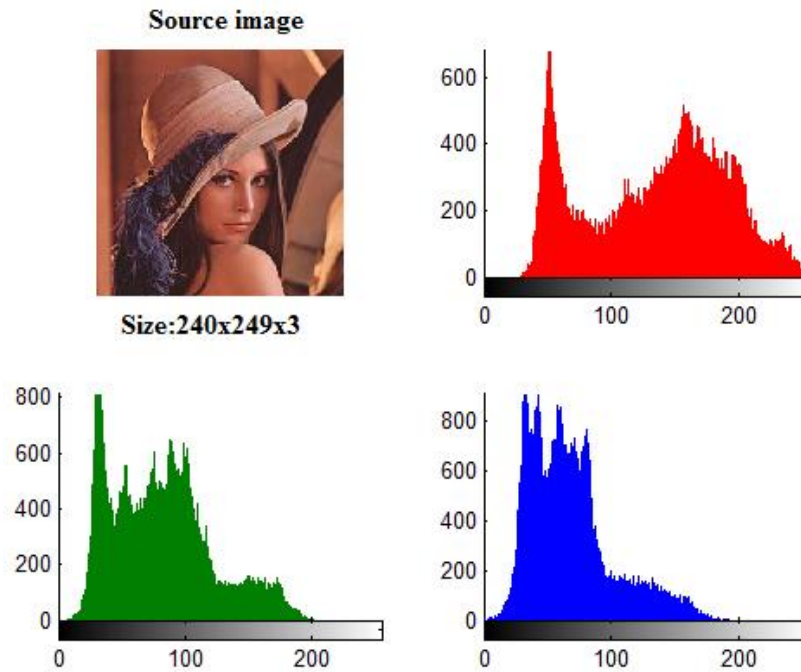


Figure 6: Source image example

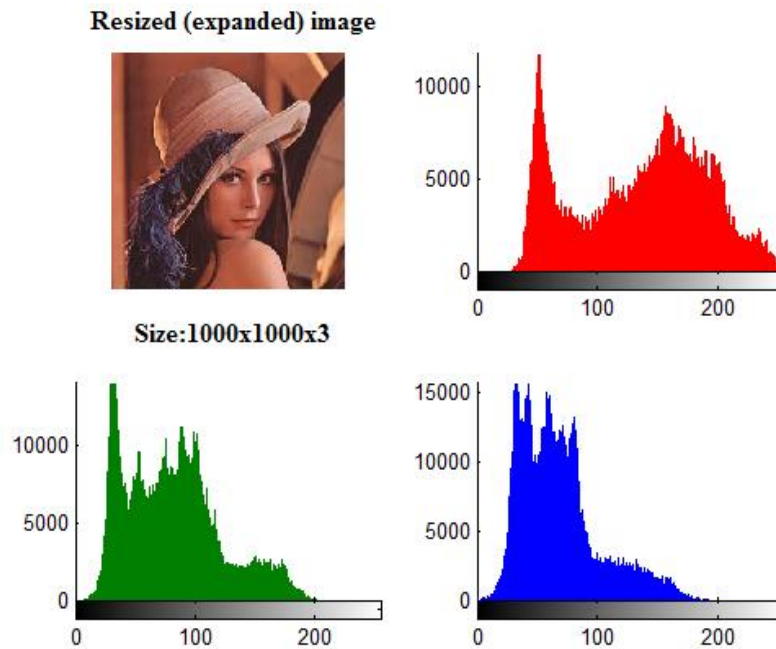


Figure 7: Expanded image

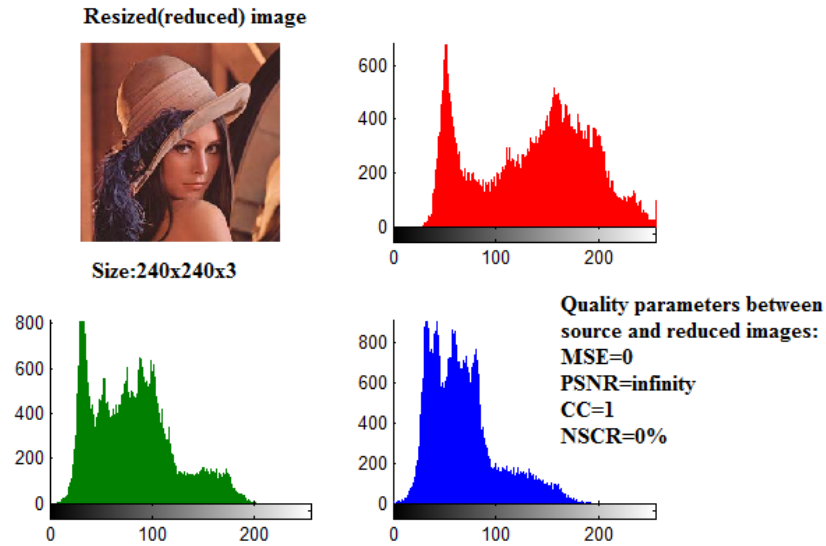


Figure 8: Reduced image

The hiding function of the proposed method can be implemented applying the following steps:

Step 1:

Data preparation:

- 1) Get the PK.
- 2) Read the covering image, get the image size, resize the image, get the resized image size.
- 3) Get the DCI to be hidden, get the image size.
- 4) Calculate the starting position of the covering bytes.

This step can be implemented by executing the following sequence of mat lab operations:

```
rn1=3000;rn2=3000;P=0.1;
c1=imread('C:\Users\win 7\Desktop\Lena.jpg');
[cn1 cn2 cn3]=size(c1);
c2=imresize(c1,[rn1,rn2]);
[nn1 nn2 nn3]=size(c2);L2=nn1*nn2*nn3;
a1=imread('C:\Users\win 7\Desktop\st_images\4.2.03.tiff');
[n1 n2 n3]=size(a1);L1=n1*n2*n3;
POS=fix(P*L2);
```

Step 2:

DCI hiding:

- 1) Reshape the secret image to one row matrix.
- 2) Reshape the covering image to one row matrix.
- 3) Convert the secret image row matrix to binary to get image binary matrix (IBM);
- 4) Reshape IBM to one column matrix to get RIBM.
- 5) Get the covering bytes.
- 6) Convert the covering bytes to binary.
- 7) Let the LSBs of the covering bytes equal RIBM to get the stego bytes binary version.
- 8) Convert the stego bytes to decimal.
- 9) Return the stego bytes back to the image row matrix.

This step can be implemented by executing the following sequence of mat lab operations:


```

a2=reshape(a1,1,L1);
c3=reshape(c2,1,L2);
st=c3;
a3=dec2bin(a2,8);
a4=reshape(a3,L1*8,1);
s1=c3(1,POS+1:POS+L1*8);
s2=dec2bin(s1,8);
s2(:,8)=a4;
s3=bin2dec(s2)';
st(1,POS+1:POS+L1*8)=s3;

```

Step 3:

Producing stego image:

- 1) Reshape the stego image row matrix to 3D matrix.
- 2) Resize the stego image back to original size.

This step can be implemented by executing the following sequence of mat lab operations:

```

stego1=reshape(st,nn1,nn2,nn3);
stego=imresize(stego1,[cn1 cn2]);

```

The extracting function can be implemented applying the following steps:

Step 1:

Data preparation:

- 1) Get the PK.
- 2) Resize the stego image and get the image size.
- 3) Calculate the starting position of the stego bytes.

This step can be implemented by executing the following sequence of mat lab operations:

```

rn1=3000;rn2=3000;P=0.1;
stego2=imresize(stego1,[rn1 rn2]);
LS=prod(size(stego2);
POS=fix(LS*P);

```

Step 2:

DCI extraction:

- 1) Reshape the stego image to one row matrix.
- 2) Get the stego bytes.
- 3) Convert the stego bytes to binary.
- 4) Get the LSBs from the binary version of the stego bytes to create a one column matrix.
- 5) Reshape the one column matrix to 8 column matrix to get the DCI IBM.
- 6) Convert IBM to decimal.
- 7) Reshape the decimal matrix to DCI size.

This step can be implemented by executing the following sequence of mat lab operations:


```

stego3=reshape(stego2,1,L2);
stb=stego3(1,POS+1:POS+L1*8);
stb1=dec2bin(stb,8);
eil=stb1(:,8);
ei2=reshape(eil,L1,8);
ei3=bin2dec(ei2)';
ei4=reshape(ei3,n1,n2,n3);
ei5=uint8(ei4);

```

Implementation and Results Discussion

The proposed method was implemented and tested using various gray and color images, the images were taken from the image data base with the link "<https://sipi.usc.edu/database>", several approaches of the obtained results analysis were done, below we will follow up these analysis:

1) Speed analysis

The proposed method was tested using various messages, the image lena.tiff was selected as a covering image, the following PK was used, the hiding time (HT) in seconds, the extraction time (ET) and the processing time (PT=HT+ET) in seconds were measured, the hiding throughput (HTP) in K bytes per second, the extracting throughput (ETP) in K bytes per second and the processing throughput (PTP) were calculated, and table 3 and 4 show the obtained speed results:

Used private key:

rn1=3000;rn2=3000;

P=0.1;

Table 3: Obtained times results

Image	Size	HT(second)	ET(second)	PT(second)
5.1.09	256x256	2.1602	0.2973	2.4575
5.1.10	256x256	2.1803	0.2973	2.4776
5.2.08	512x512	7.7833	1.2073	8.9906
5.2.09	512x512	7.5495	1.1523	8.7018
5.3.01	1024x1024	29.5247	4.5847	34.1094
5.3.02	1024x1024	29.4508	4.5970	34.0478
4.2.03	512x512x3	21.9895	3.4146	25.4041
4.2.05	512x512x3	21.9611	3.4321	25.3932
Average		15.3249	2.3728	17.6978

Table 4: Obtained throughputs results

Image	HTP(K bytes per second)	ETP K bytes per second)	PTP K bytes per second)
5.1.09	29.6268	215.3023	26.0431
5.1.10	29.3540	215.2546	25.8314
5.2.08	32.8909	212.0457	28.4742
5.2.09	33.9096	222.1705	29.4193
5.3.01	34.6828	223.3505	30.0210
5.3.02	34.7699	222.7537	30.0754
4.2.03	34.9257	224.9191	30.2314
4.2.05	34.9709	223.7716	30.2444
Average	33.1413	219.9460	28.7925

As shown from tables 3 and 4 the proposed method provided a good speed parameters' values, these results were compared with other methods speed (see table 2), and the proposed method gave a good speed up (speed up of the proposed method equal proposed method throughput divided by other method throughput), it reduced both the hiding and extracting time, and at the same time it increased both the hiding and extracting throughputs, table 5 and 6 show the speed up provided by the proposed method:

Table 5: Speed up of the proposed method in the hiding process

Method	Hiding throughput (K bytes per second)	Speed up of the proposed method
CLSB	6.7599	4.9026
SLSB	0.1361	243.5070
DSLBS	0.8784	37.7292
Proposed method	33.1413	1.0000

Table 6: Speed up of the proposed method in the extracting process

Method	Extracting throughput (K bytes per second)	Speed up of the proposed method
CLSB	6.5062	33.8056
SLSB	6.5725	33.4646
DSLBS	6.5062	33.8056
Proposed method	219.9460	1.0000

2) Stego image quality analysis

The stego image must be closed to the covering image, the quality of the stego image can be visually tested by comparing by eyes the covering image with the stego image, they must be closed, and also the covering image histograms must be closed to the stego image histograms. To prove this fact the image 4.2.03.tiff was hidden in the image lena.tiff using the above mentioned PK, and figures 9, 10 and 11 show the obtained images:

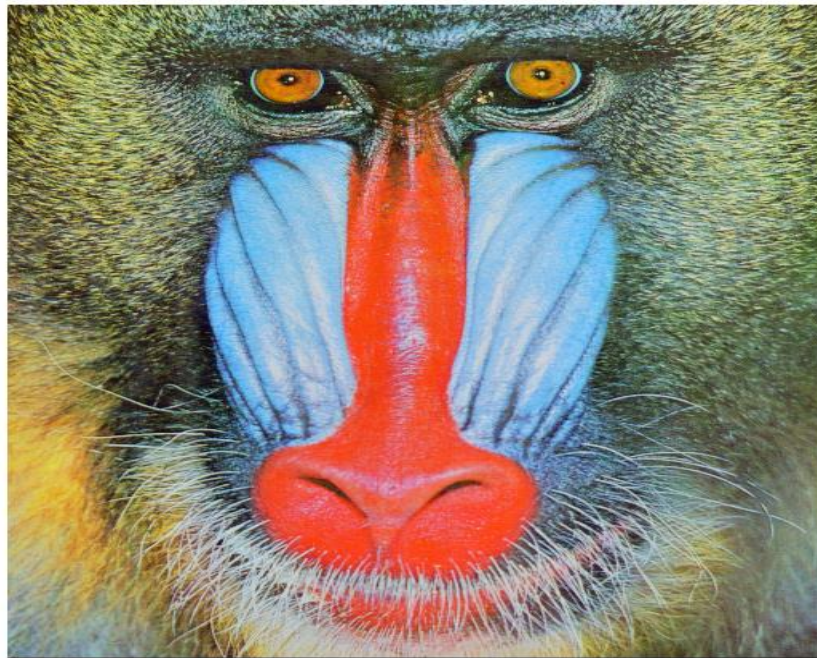


Figure 9: Hidden secret image

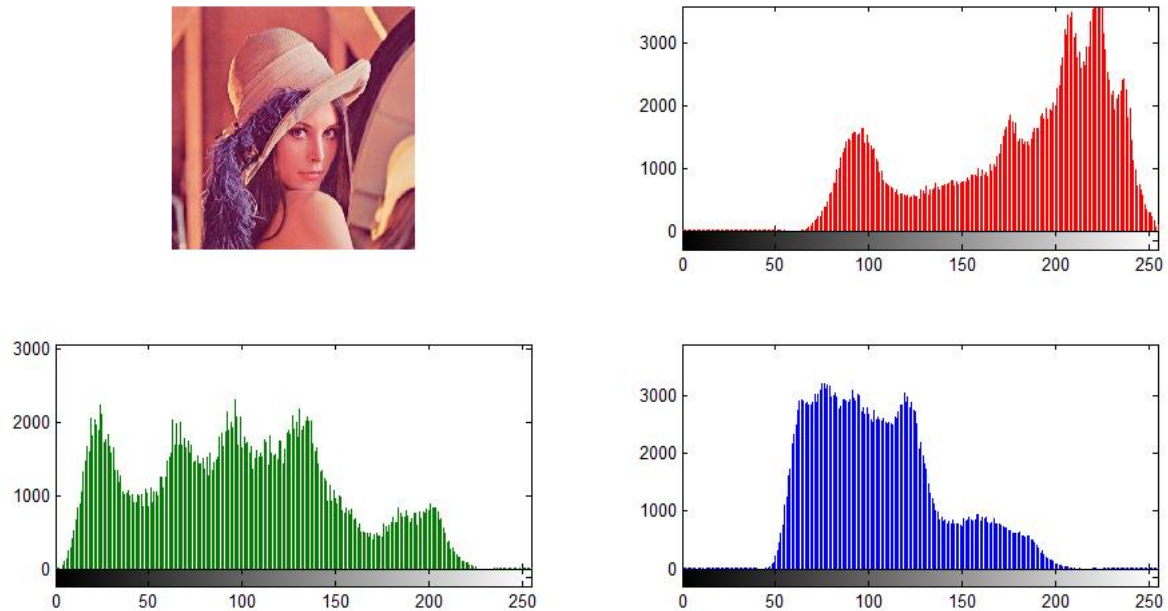


Figure 10: Covering image and histograms

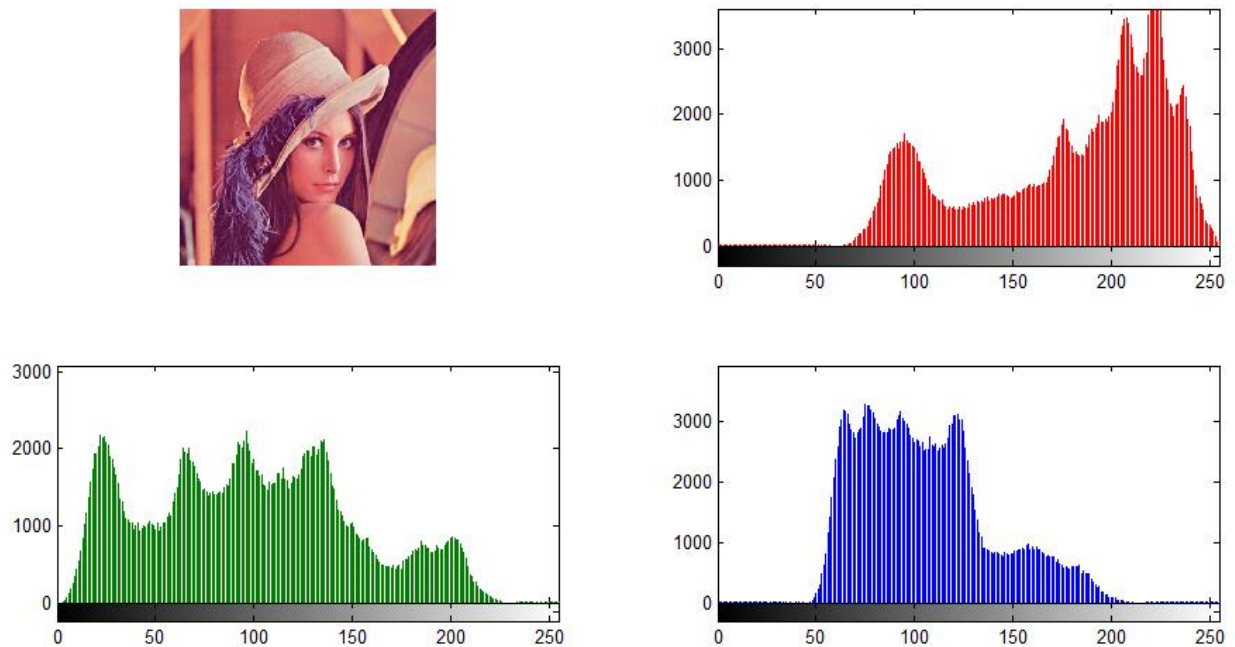


Figure 11: Stego image and histograms

Examining the covering and the stego images by eyes we can see that they are much closed.

Some images from the image data base were selected, each of them was hidden in the covering image 'lena.tiff'; the quality parameters between the covering and the stego images were calculated, the obtained values of these parameters shown in table 6 prove that the proposed method provides a stego images with good quality and it satisfies the quality requirements of good stego system.

Hidden image	MSE	PSNR	CC	NSCR(%)
5.1.09	0.0098	157.0462	1	0.9832
5.1.10	0.0099	156.9758	1	0.9902
5.2.08	0.0390	143.2764	1	3.8964
5.2.09	0.0385	143.3959	1	3.8501
5.3.01	0.1541	129.5296	0.9999	15.4057
5.3.02	0.1555	129.4387	0.9999	15.5463
Remarks	Low	High	Closed to 1	Low
Satisfies the quality requirements				

3) Sensitivity analysis

The Hiding and extracting functions must use the same PKs, any minor changes in the PK in the extraction function will be considered as a hacking attempt by producing damaged extracted DCI, and to show this fact the image 4.2.03.tiff was hidden in the covering image lena.tiff using PK1, the hidden image was extracted using each of the following PKs, figure 12 shows that changing the PK in the extracting function produced a damaged extracted image, and this proves the sensitivity of the proposed method.

PK1:

rn1=3000;rn2=3000;

P=0.1;

PK2:

rn1=2999;rn2=3000;

P=0.1;

PK3:

rn1=3000;rn2=3010;

P=0.1;

PK4:

rn1=3000;rn2=3000;

P=0.01;

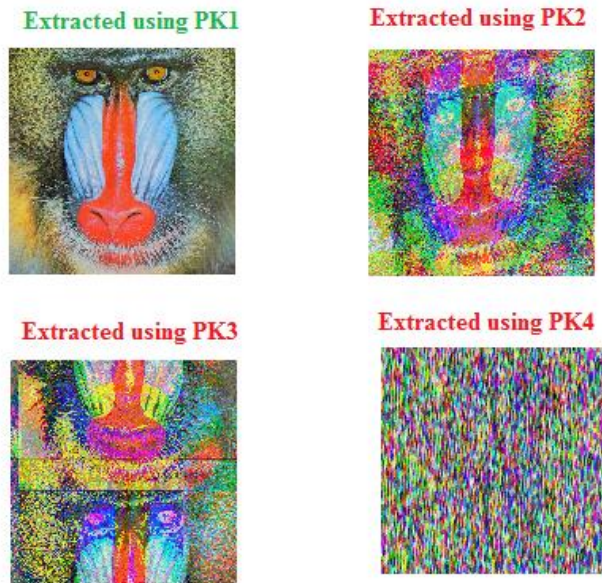


Figure 12: Extracted images

Conclusion

A simple method of color image steganography was proposed, the method used a simple resizing operation and a batch bits hiding and extracting operation to apply digital image steganography, the covering image and the secret image can be any image (gray or color) with any size, the secret image size was not limited to the covering image size, the size of the secret image can be greater than the size of the covering image. The method used a 192 bits private key, this key provided a strong enough key space to protect the image from being hacked, the extracted image was very sensitive to the selected values of the private key in the extracting phase.

The proposed method was implemented using various images, the obtained speed results proved that the proposed method reduced both the hiding and extracting times, the proposed method comparing with other existing methods of data steganography provided a significant speed up by increasing the throughputs of image hiding and image extracting. The proposed method provided an excellent quality parameters, the stego image was always closed to the covering image.

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