AN ACOUSTIC KEYSTROKE TRANSIENT CANCELER FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION TERMINALS USING A SEMI-BLIND ADAPTIVE FILTER MODEL

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ABSTRACT

In many teleconferencing applications using modern laptop and net-book devices it is common to encounter annoying keyboard typing noise. In this paper we propose an acoustic keystroke transient canceler for speech communication terminals as a novel broadband adaptive filter application in such a hands-free scenario. We present this approach in the context of the Google Chromebook Pixel device which is equipped with a special audio reference channel providing various new signal processing possibilities. Our novel semi-blind/semi-supervised approach exploiting this new degree of freedom, combined with the system-based broadband estimation and a novel adaptation control yields a high-quality speech enhancement even under challenging acoustic conditions.

Index Terms— Acoustic keystroke transients, noise reduction, impulsive noise, hands-free speech communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid increase in availability of high speed internet connections has made personal computing devices a very popular basis for tele-conferencing applications. While the embedded microphones, loudspeakers and webcams in laptop or tablet computers make setting up conference calls very easy, the resulting acoustic hands-free communication scenario generally brings with it the need for a number of challenging signal processing problems, such as acoustic echo control, signal separation/extraction from background noise or other competing sources, and, ideally, dereverberation [1, 2].

A special type of acoustic noise which can be a particularly persistent problem, and which we deal with in the present paper, is the impulsive noise caused by keystroke transients, especially when using the embedded keyboard of a laptop computer during teleconferencing applications (e.g., in order to make notes or to write emails). In such a setup, this impulsive noise in the microphone signals can be a significant nuisance due to the spatial proximity between the microphones and the keyboard, and partly due to possible vibration effects and solid-borne sound conduction within the device casing.

Most of the well-known single-channel speech enhancement algorithms are typically based on noise power estimation and spectral amplitude modification in the short-time Fourier transform (STFT) domain, e.g., [3]. However, reducing highly nonstationary noise such as keystroke transients remains a challenging problem for many algorithms of this type and a still very active field of research, e.g., [4],[5]. In a recent study, the application of separation methods like non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) in the spectral domain has shown promising results for impulsive noise [6]. While this can be effective where long signal samples are available, particularly for batch estimation, unfortunately, in practice there is very little adaptation time available due to the short activity of the key stroke transients and the variations of the acoustic click events. Note also that the keyboard noise is broadband with its dominant frequency components typically in the same range as that of the speech signal. Due to these challenging conditions, this signal processing problem has been tackled so far mainly by missing feature approaches, e.g., [7] based on [8]. Similar approaches are also known from image and video processing, e.g., [9]. Similarly to the speech enhancement algorithms mentioned above, the missing feature-type algorithms typically require very accurate detections of the keystroke transients. Moreover, in the case of keystroke noise, this detection problem is exacerbated by both the reverberation effects and the fact that each keystroke actually leads to two audible clicks with unknown and varying distance, whereby the peak of the second click is often buried entirely in the overlapping speech signal. Note that simply using the typing information from the operating system of the device is usually not accurate enough as the temporal deviation between the typing information registered by the OS and the actual acoustic event can vary widely and is not deterministic. Recent papers addressing the detection problem for suppression of transients (but otherwise still based on a conventional (signal-based) noise suppression algorithm or a modification thereof) are, e.g., [10, 11, 12, 13].

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we will clarify and analyze the signal processing problem in somewhat more detail and we will focus on the specific class of approaches characterised by the use of broadband adaptive FIR filters. In this context we specifically turn our attention to the Chromebook Pixel which is one of the first commercial-of-the-shelf products featuring an additional reference sensor underneath the keyboard. As we will see, in this context, the related semi-supervised / semi-blind signal processing problem can be regarded as a new class of adaptive filtering problems in the hands-free context in addition to the already more extensively studied classes of problems in this field [1, 2]. Since the operating system of the Chromebook is based on the well-documented open-source project Chromium OS [14], it provides new opportunities for the development of further improved signal enhancement algorithms. Secondly, based on this available platform, we discuss and evaluate in this paper a novel candidate algorithm specifically for semi-supervised acoustic keystroke transient cancellation.

2. KEYBOARD REFERENCE PICKUP

Signal reconstruction generally becomes more and more challenging with increasing typing speed and/or increasing room reverberation causing the effects of the keystrokes to overlap. In reverberant environments, the click noise may well extend over multiple analysis blocks. Note that each character consists of two keystroke transients (downward and upward movements of the keys.) A statistical analysis of typical typing speeds can be found, e.g., in [15].

Two ways to tackle the above problems are (1) to take into account some less defective signal as side information on the
keystrokes and (2) to take into account the acoustic signal propagation including the reverberation effects using dynamical models. Hence, the novel approach in this paper takes advantage of an additional microphone underneath the keyboard and, as shown in the next sections, it uses an adaptive filtering approach exploiting the knowledge of this keyboard microphone signal. The Google Chromebook Pixel exhibits such a reference microphone as well as two voice microphones on top of the display, as shown in Fig. 1. This setup allows for the development of more powerful, semi-supervised algorithms.

![Fig. 1. Keyboard reference pickup in Google’s chromebook pixel.](image)

With the available reference signal and the application of adaptive filtering, the problem appears to be similar to a conventional acoustic echo cancellation (AEC) problem [16, 17, 18] or an interference cancellation problem [19]. However, there are notable differences between conventional AEC and this keystroke transient suppression which are reflected by the following requirements:

(i) The “echo path” to be identified is rapidly time-varying.

(ii) The excitation (keystroke transients) of the “echo path” is typically very short, i.e., limited data for the estimation process.

(iii) We have cross-talk of low (but noticeable) power from the speech source into the keyboard microphone.

(iv) Double-talk control (or double-talk detection in particular), as in conventional AEC is not straightforward here (mainly due to (iii) and (v)).

(v) Highly nonlinear systems. Our experiments have shown that the acoustic paths from the keyboard to the microphones contain significant nonlinear contributions due to the solid-borne sound conduction within the casing. The nonlinear contributions (rattling) also exhibit a significant memory [20].

(vi) The algorithm should have low complexity despite the challenging requirements (i)-(v).

In the next Sections, we develop and evaluate an efficient semi-supervised algorithm which is designed to meet the above requirements (i)-(vi) for keystroke transient cancellation.

### 3. KEYSTROKE TRANSIENT CANCELLATION BASED ON BROADBAND ADAPTIVE MIMO FILTERING

Our setup can be regarded as an acoustic mixing system with multiple input channels and multiple output channels (MIMO) consisting of impulse responses \( h_{qp} \), \( q = 1, 2 \), \( p = 1, 2, 3 \), see Fig. 2. Analogously, the signal processing for extracting the desired speech signal can be considered as a corresponding MIMO demixing system. The coefficients of the MIMO system are then regarded as latent variables which are assumed to have less variability over multiple time frames of the observed data. As they allow for a global optimization over longer data sequences, latent variable models have the well-known advantage of reducing the dimensions of data, making it easier to understand and, thus, in our application, reduce or avoid distortions in the output signals. In the reminder of this paper we will refer to this approach as system-based optimization in contrast to the existing signal-based approaches mentioned in Sect. 1. Note that in practice we can expect synergies by combining system-based and signal-based approaches for signal enhancement as in AEC [18].

Based on the framework of broadband adaptive MIMO signal processing there are several conceivable specialized adaptive filter configurations to efficiently solve the problem. These specialized approaches, such as the already mentioned AEC approach can often be obtained as ‘pruned’ versions of the full blind source separation (BSS) approach, e.g., [21, 22, 23, 24]. In this paper, we focus on one particularly simple approach that falls into this category but due to the above list of requirements (i)-(vi), it differs from the AEC setup in order to largely circumvent the nonlinearity issues. We can observe that the relation between \( x_0, x_3 \) is closer to linearity than the relation between \( x_3, x_1 \) and the relation between \( x_3, x_2 \), respectively. This would motivate a blind spatial signal processing using the two array microphones \( x_1, x_2 \).

On the other hand, \( x_3 \) still contains significantly less crosstalk and less reverberation due to the proximity between the keyboard and the keyboard microphone. Therefore, the keyboard microphone is best suited for guiding the adaptation. In other words, while the core algorithm is adapted blindly, the overall system can be considered as a semi-blind system. The guidance of the adaptation using the keyboard microphone addresses both the double-talk problem and the resolution of the inherent permutation ambiguity concerning the desired source in the output of blind adaptive filtering algorithms. Interestingly, the resulting structure can be interpreted either as a subspase approach/blind signal extraction (BSE) approach [25] or as a method for blind system identification (BSI) for single-input and multiple-output (SIMO) systems [23, 24] (In the second-order-statistics case this pruned case coincides rigorously with the blind SIMO system identification approach in, e.g., [26, 27]). As we will see, both interpretations are utilized in our practical implementation of the overall system; the BSE for extracting the desired speech signal, and the BSI for the novel double-talk control proposed in Sect. 4.

In this paper, we further simplify the demixing system by keeping the subfilter \( w_{11} \) fixed as a pure delay, as shown in Fig. 2. In this way we avoid any further linear distortions of the desired speech signal. The adaptive subfilter \( w_{21} \) is then simply modified to \( w_{21}^{\prime} \). Note that this approach can be considered as the above SIMO-based BSE approach with an additional equalizer. To ensure causality of the adaptive filter \( w_{21}^{\prime} \) for arbitrary speaker positions, the delay is chosen as \( D = \lfloor L/2 \rfloor \), where \( L \) denotes the demixing filter length.

![Fig. 2. Block diagram of the proposed simplified system using adaptive filters in the foreground and in the background for adaptation control (according to Sect. 4).](image)
4. AN EFFICIENT REALIZATION AND CONTROL OF THE ADAPTATION

Having identified a promising candidate for an optimal system-based approach according to the above requirements (i)-(vi), we are now going to develop the ingredients for an efficient practical realization. Special emphasis will be placed on the novel semi-blind double-talk detection specifically taking into account requirements (iii)-(v).

Later, in Table 1, we will summarize a pseudocode based on these building blocks and the semi-blind structure according to Fig. 2.

4.1. Broadband block-online frequency-domain adaptation

As a first step, we apply a computationally efficient frequency-domain formulation of the above filter structure following [28]. An important feature of this frequency-domain framework is that it approximates the efficiency of both the adaptation processes (approximate diagonalization of the Hessian) and the filtering process (fast convolution by exploiting the efficiency of the FFT) [28].

In this paper we will work with partitioned blocks, i.e., the (integer) block length \( N = L/K \) can be a fraction of the filter length \( L \). This decoupling of \( L \) and \( N \) is especially desirable for handling highly non-stationary signals such as the keystroke transients in our application [29, 28, 30].

Let us consider the input-output relationship for one individual demixing subfilter \( w_{pq} \). The output signal of this subfilter at time \( n \) reads \( y_{pq}(n) = \sum_{l=-\infty}^{\infty} x_{pq}(n-l) w_{pq,l} \), where \( w_{pq,l} \) are the coefficients of the filter impulse response \( w_{pq} \). By partitioning the impulse response \( w_{pq} \) of length \( L \) into \( K \) segments of integer length \( N = L/K \) as in [29], \( y_{pq}(n) \) can be written as

\[
y_{pq}(n) = \sum_{k=0}^{K-1} x_{pq,k}(n)w_{pq,k},
\]

where vector \( x_{pq,k}(n) \) consists of \( x_{pq}(n-Nk), \ldots, x_{pq}(n-Nk-N+1) \). Superscript \( T \) denotes transposition of a vector or a matrix. The length-\( N \) vectors \( w_{pq,k}, k = 0, \ldots, K-1 \), represent subfilters of the partitioned tap-weight vector \( w_{pq} = [w_{pq,0}, \ldots, w_{pq,K-1}]^T \).

Since our algorithm is based on block processing, we consider blocks of output samples. A length-\( N \) block of output samples

\[
y_{pq}(n) = [y_{pq}(nN), \ldots, y_{pq}(nN+N-1)]^T
\]

can, analogously to (1), be formulated as a sum of \( K \) matrix-vector products (instead of the inner products in (1)). A key insight in broadband frequency-domain adaptive filtering is that each of the \( K \) matrices can be diagonalized very efficiently and without any approximation using DFT matrices (implemented by FFTs) after applying certain window matrices, as shown in detail, e.g., in [28]. These window matrices and the resulting closed-form expressions (such as, e.g., the block error signal \( e(m) \), with \( m \) being the block time index) are summarized in Table 1.

Having expressed the error signal in a compact partitioned-block frequency-domain notation, similarly compact formulations of frequency-domain adaptive filter (FDAF) algorithms, based on a block-based optimization criterion, such as \( J(m, w) = (1 - \lambda) \sum_{m} \lambda^{m-1}e(m)e^T(m)w(m) \), where \( \lambda \) is a forgetting factor \( 0 < \lambda < 1 \), can be derived [28]. By exploiting the efficiency of the FFT, the resulting FDAF algorithms exhibit both a very low complexity (\( O(L \log L) \) per sample), and a fast RLS-like convergence speed as necessary in our application.

Table 1 shows the pseudocode of an overall algorithm based on the system configuration according to Fig. 2, and the multidelay formulation mentioned above. As indicated in Fig. 2, the overall system consists of a foreground filter (i.e., the main adaptive filter producing the enhanced output signal \( y_1 \) as described above) and a separate background filter (dashed part, used for controlling the adaptation of the foreground filter). These two components are also reflected by the two lowermost (main) sections in the pseudocode.

The foreground filter corresponds to the steps (3s)-(3w), i.e., the last section in the pseudocode, including the necessary Kalman gain (3e),(3f) [which is used for computational efficiency for both the foreground filter and background filter due to their common input signal \( X_2(m) \)], and the required input signals (3a)-(3c). The background filter for adaptation control will be discussed in more detail below in Sect. 4.2.

An important feature of the implementation according to Table 1 in order to further speed up the convergence are the additional offline iterations (index \( \ell \)) in each block. This method also follows from the relation between supervised and blind adaptive filtering [21], where it is probably more common. Moreover, to avoid the undesirable ‘overlearning’ phenomenon (from the viewpoint of system-based estimation) for a high number of offline iterations with this method, yet allow to a certain degree for the exploitation of its rapid tracking capability of local signal statistics, the total number \( \ell_{\text{max}} \) of offline iterations is subdivided into two steps.

4.2. Semi-blind multidelay double-talk detection

We now focus on the important aspect of controlling the adaptation, i.e., the double-talk detector (first main part in Table 1). Here, the goal is to develop a reliable decision mechanism so that the adaptation of the keystroke transient canceller is performed only during the exclusive activity of the keystroke transients.

Despite of the availability of the keyboard reference microphone (signal \( x_3 \)), it turns out that in our scenario a reliable adaptation control is a more challenging task than the adaptation control problem for the well-known supervised adaptive filtering case, e.g., for acoustic echo cancellation. This is mainly due to the cross-talk of the desired speech signal into the keyboard reference microphone, as well as the very significant nonlinear components in the propagation paths of the keystroke transients (requirements (iii)-(v) in Sect. 2).

Hence, in addition to a power-based or correlation-based decision statistic (as for AEC; see, e.g., [30] and references therein), we propose in Table 1 a novel adaptation control based on multiple decision criteria which also exploit the spatial selectivity by the multiple microphone channels. Indeed, the resulting algorithm can be regarded as an according semi-blind generalization of the multidelay-based detection mechanism proposed earlier in [30].

In addition to the short-time signal power \( \sigma_{x_3}^2(m) \) as a first detection variable, the detection variable \( \xi_1 \) describes the ratio of a linear approximation to the nonlinear contribution in \( x_3 \). Note that this detection statistic formally resembles the one in [30] but the mechanism here is slightly different.

Probably the most important criterion is described by the detection variable \( \xi_2 \). This criterion can be seen as a spatio-temporal source signal activity detector. Note that both, the detection variables \( \xi_1 \) and \( \xi_2 \) are based on the adaptive background filter (similar to the foreground filter, but with slightly larger stepsize and smaller forgetting factor for quick reaction of the detection mechanism).

The detection variable \( \xi_2 \) exploits the microphone array geometry and the fact that the background filter performs an approx. BSI of \( h_{13} \) and/or \( h_{23} \) (see Sect. 3). According to the physical setup, we can safely assume that the direct path of \( h_{23} \) is always significantly shorter than the direct path of \( h_{13} \). Due to the relation of the maxima of the background filter coefficients and the time difference of arrival (e.g., [23]), an approximate decision on the activity of both sources \( s_1 \) and \( s_2 \) can be made (\( 1 \leq a < b < c \leq L \) in (3p)). To further improve the detection accuracy, a regularization for sparse
learning of the background filter coefficients is applied ((3m)-3o),
where \( \Phi(\cdot, a) \) denotes a center clipper, also called shrinkage operator,
of width \( a \) [31, 32].

5. EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

The signal extraction has been evaluated using recorded signals from the
Chromebokk in a regular office room (T\(_{\text{off}} \approx 300\text{ms}) by both ob-
jective and subjective performance measures. Figure 3 illustrates a
typical use case. The first subplot shows one of the recorded voice
mic signals. During the first 6sec. only the speech signal was active
(male speaker), and thereafter the typing activity sets in (various
keys across the whole keyboard were used). The simulation cov-
cers single-talk and double-talk (6.10sec and 14...16.5sec) conditions.
The second and third subplots show the processed output signal and
the acoustic click suppression (dB), respectively. We see that both,
with and without simultaneous speech activity, a significant suppres-
sion of the click noise can be achieved and maintained.

![Fig. 3. Signal extraction result.](image)

Figure 4 shows a summary of the results of a standardized sub-
jective listening test (MUSHRA, 'MUlti Stimulus test with Hidden
Reference and Anchor' [33]) carried out with 10 listeners.
The sound quality was quantified on a scale from 0 to 100 for 4 differ-
rent estimation mechanisms of the two approaches, a sy
nergistic
combinability for even further improvement is to be expecte-

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have presented a novel and efficient semi-blind
system-based approach for keystroke transient cancellation. The
approach is highly efficient, yields a high suppression performance,
and minimal signal distortion. A possible extension to the approach is,
e.g., the use of robust statistics [30, 34, 35].
7. REFERENCES


