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CALTRANS DIVISION OF RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SYSTEM INFORMATION
TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO SOLUTIONS

Research Notes

LiDAR Data Fusion for Multi-Modality at Traffic Signals

This project seeks to explore the application of LiDAR sensors in intersection traffic signal control systems, in conjunction with additional multi-modal sensors in other connected automated vehicles or infrastructure to perform sensor fusion tasks. This initiative aligns with the broader goal of improving safety for vulnerable road users (VRUs).

Traffic Operations

MAY 2026

Project Title: LiDAR Data Fusion for Multi-Modality at Traffic Signals

Task Number: 4371

Start Date: November 13, 2024

Completion Date: June 29, 2026

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WHAT IS THE NEED?

The pressing need to improve traffic safety, especially for vulnerable road users (VRUs) such as pedestrians, cyclists, and scooters, is a significant factor in urban planning and transportation management. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), US intersections witnessed 10,626 traffic fatalities in 2020, including 1,674 pedestrians and 355 cyclists, which constituted 27% of all traffic-related deaths. The escalating trends in pedestrian and cyclist fatalities underscore the urgent need for enhanced and effective traffic safety measures at intersections.

A key challenge in enhancing intersection safety is the need for accurate, detailed, and real-time data that captures the complexities of the dynamic and uncertain environment of intersections. This environment includes a diverse array of vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists, and scooters, each with unique movement patterns and safety needs. Particularly challenging is the task of object detection and tracking, and trajectory prediction of vulnerable road users due to their unpredictable and diverse nature. Additionally, the importance of collecting intricate data like vehicle type, speed, direction, occupancy, pedestrian, and cyclist volumes cannot be overstated for informed and efficient traffic control decisions.

Traditional traffic signal control systems are fundamentally limited in their ability to meet these intricate data requirements for multi-modality. They primarily rely on preset timing schedules based on historical traffic patterns and broad generalizations, often resulting in a mismatch with dynamically changing, real-time traffic conditions. Some systems utilize

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inductive loop detectors for real-time data, but these devices are limited in their ability to detect non-motorized traffic and provide complex data such as specific vehicle types or intricate pedestrian movement patterns. Traditional detection for vulnerable road users only provides single discrete events to serve bike and pedestrian movements. The installation and maintenance complexities and costs associated with these detectors further complicate matters.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The primary objective of this project is to leverage the capabilities of LiDAR technology in improving traffic signal operations and intersection safety, particularly for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, cyclists and scooters. This will involve the development and implementation of advanced algorithms for LiDAR-based object detection, tracking, and trajectory prediction for vulnerable road users, considering the unique challenges posed by the dynamic nature of vulnerable road users, occlusion, point cloud sparsity, and sensor limitations. Overcoming these challenges will necessitate pioneering research to build sophisticated models that can process LiDAR data, handle point cloud irregularities, achieve data fusion from multiple agents, and effectively predict the behaviors of vulnerable road users in the complex intersection environment. Another key objective is to devise and refine traffic analytics derived from the LiDAR-based detection and tracking results as well as vulnerable road users trajectory predictions. These analytics, including traffic volumes, pedestrian volume, and pedestrian crossing times, and special events or incidents, can significantly enhance traffic signal operations by enabling functionalities like dynamic green extension, touchless pedestrian service, detection of vulnerable locations, and traffic flow analytics. The project also aims to demonstrate via state-of-the-art simulation a mechanism to relay these analytics to the traffic signal controller and the approaching vehicles through Road-Side Equipment (RSE) in a connected vehicle environment.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The project is expected to provide a clear roadmap for infusing LiDAR data into local traffic signal operations, which will guide future developments in connected vehicle applications, Performance Measurement System (PeMS), and other central management systems. Ultimately, the insights gained from this project should significantly inform and shape the ongoing efforts of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and other transportation agencies towards improving intersection safety and efficiency through innovative technology integration.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

Upon successful completion of this project, we expect to have a demonstrated solution that effectively integrates LiDAR technology into traffic signal systems, providing significant enhancements in intersection safety and efficiency. This solution is expected to be capable of robustly detecting and tracking VRUs and accurately predicting their trajectories, overcoming the previously identified challenges, while also providing comprehensive traffic analytics for real-time operations and post-processing analysis. Moreover, we anticipate that the refined traffic analytics, derived from the advanced LiDAR-based detection and prediction system, will enrich the data set available for traffic management, thereby facilitating more effective and responsive control of traffic signals. This system will also enhance service for vulnerable road users and other road users, supporting extended green lights, touchless pedestrian services, and other safety and efficiency improvements.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The most recent progress of this research was the demonstration of the developed infrastructure-LiDAR based object detection-tracking, trajectory prediction and traffic analytics generation algorithm at a Caltrans designated smart intersection. However, due to time constraints, a traffic corridor

at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) was selected in place of a Caltrans intersection.

Before testing, the researchers selected suitable LiDAR sensors taking into consideration various factors such as cost, performance, robustness, and compatibility with existing infrastructure. The selected LiDAR sensors were then calibrated to ensure accurate and reliable data collection.

Next, domain adaptation techniques were applied to adjust the machine learning models. The developed models included object detection, tracking, vulnerable road user trajectory prediction, and traffic analytics generation. The models were developed from data sets collected earlier in this project, then calibrated to specific conditions and features of the selected traffic corridor.

This research project is set to conclude in June 2026, and a detailed report will be published detailing the results of this research project.