

**Paper Submitted to
2003 Annual Conference of the
Transportation Association of Canada**

**OBTAINING TRAVELLER INFORMATION VIA MOBILE PHONE
LOCATION REFERENCING – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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ABSTRACT

Advanced traveller information systems (ATIS) constitute one of the key elements of ITS. While a great deal of research has been conducted to examine various aspects of ATIS, such as data fusion, estimating travel times, what mechanisms are most appropriate for disseminating travel information, and the effects of providing traveller information, currently the most significant factor limiting the wide spread deployment of ATIS is the lack of a cost effective method of obtaining data reflecting network travel conditions.

It has been proposed that the ability to autonomously determine the location of wireless communication devices (e.g. cell phones) provide an opportunity to acquire large quantities of travel data without the need to deploy a large and costly network of traffic surveillance equipment. To date, such a system has not been deployed in North America. However, a number of projects have been initiated to examine the feasibility of such an approach. This paper explores the potential that such an approach could have in terms of supporting traffic management and traveller information services. In addition, this paper examines a number of the key challenges that must be overcome before such an approach can be implemented.

Introduction

The provision of accurate, relevant and timely road conditions information has long been recognised as of value to travellers and traffic system management personnel. Currently, the state of practice with respect to the provision of traffic information is rather limited. Congestion information is provided at a very small number of fixed points along selected major freeways (i.e. changeable message signs) and qualitative information is provided periodically over AM and FM radio. While these methods of disseminating traffic information are of some value, they are significantly limited in terms of spatial coverage, accuracy, and timeliness of delivery to the traveller.

One of the most significant stumbling blocks in the widespread deployment of full function Advanced and In-Vehicle Traveller Information Systems (A/IVTIS) is the difficulty in obtaining adequate traffic conditions data. Current technologies for obtaining traffic data, such as loop detectors, video imaging, DSRC (i.e. tag), radar, etc., are infrastructure intensive, and therefore are prohibitively expensive to deploy over large geographic areas. Consequently, most traffic management centres in North America have deployed traffic surveillance infrastructure only along heavily travelled corridors. Furthermore, jurisdictional issues associated with private sector firms installing traffic surveillance equipment on public roadways inhibits the private sector development of A/IVTIS. The result is that while there is generally adequate traffic data available for major freeways within most large urban centres in North America, there is typically very little data available for the remainder of the transportation network.

One solution that has been proposed to obtain traffic data over large networks with limited infrastructure investment is to track the location of mobile phones. Wireless service providers have been legislated in the US, Canada, and elsewhere to provide the capability to determine the location of a mobile phone when a call is made to 911. This capability already exists for wired phones and is used to provide expedient emergency response as the location from which the call originated is automatically determined. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decided in 1996 to require all wireless service providers to provide location information to enhanced 911 (E911) public safety services. In Phase I, wireless service providers were required by March 1998 to report the originating phone number and location of the cell site receiving the originating call. In Phase II, wireless service providers are required to provide the originating phone number and estimates of the latitude and longitude of the caller's position. The FCC established a four-year window beginning in October 1, 2001 and ending December 31, 2005, during which these requirements must be met. The FCC has stipulated that position estimates must be within 100 meters for 67% of the calls and 300 meters for 95% of the calls.

It is clear that while the motivation for incorporating location referencing capabilities is compliance with the FCC ruling, the implementation of these location referencing capabilities presents a number of interesting opportunities for meeting other needs, such as obtaining traffic network conditions. For example, the periodic location estimates for a phone in a vehicle can be used to determine the speed at which the vehicle is moving.

Obtaining traffic information using mobile phone tracking has several significant advantages over existing traffic surveillance approaches. First, the number of potential probes (e.g. phones in vehicles) is very large. For example, in Canada the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association (CWTA) reports that there are currently (as of end of 2002) 11.9 million cellular/PCS subscribers, with an annual growth rate of approximately 20% (CWTA, 2003). It is anticipated that by the end of 2004, more than 50% of all Canadians will be mobile phone customers. Second, these probes are sufficiently dispersed throughout the network that the number of active probes on any specific road segment in any given interval (say 15 minutes) is likely to be sufficient to provide travel time (or average speed) estimates of adequate reliability. Third, this approach is low cost, as the vehicle side infrastructure (i.e. wireless device) is already owned by the traveller, and the hardware required by the wireless operator will already be in place to meet other needs (e.g. E911 requirements).

The objective of this research is to investigate the potential of utilizing a mobile phone-based vehicle tracking system to derive useful traffic information and to develop models and algorithms that can support this functionality. In the following sections, the problem of using mobile phones as traffic probes is formally defined and various associated challenges are examined. Current literature on this topic is then reviewed to identify the issues and drawbacks in the existing approaches. Lastly, a new methodology is proposed and some preliminary results are discussed.

Use of Mobile Phones as Traffic Probes: Problem Definition and Current Methods

Consider a hypothetical case in which a vehicle is currently traveling on a road network as shown in Figure 1. The vehicle is equipped with a mobile phone and its location (longitude and latitude) is continuously tracked by some sort of network-based wireless location system. The problem of interest is to infer the traffic condition (e.g. average travel speed or travel time) of the road segment(s) or link(s) that the vehicle has recently traversed or is currently traversing. Information available for the estimation includes time-stamped location measurements (up to

current time) and a database of the road network including road geometry and network topology. The problem can be divided into two sub-problems as follows:

- 1) Determine the links the vehicle has traversed and is currently traversing on and the position of the vehicle on the link associated with each time-stamped location measurement. This sub-problem is commonly referred to as *map matching* problem;
- 2) Estimate the traffic condition variables (e.g. average travel speed or travel time) on those links that the vehicle has traversed and is currently traversing.

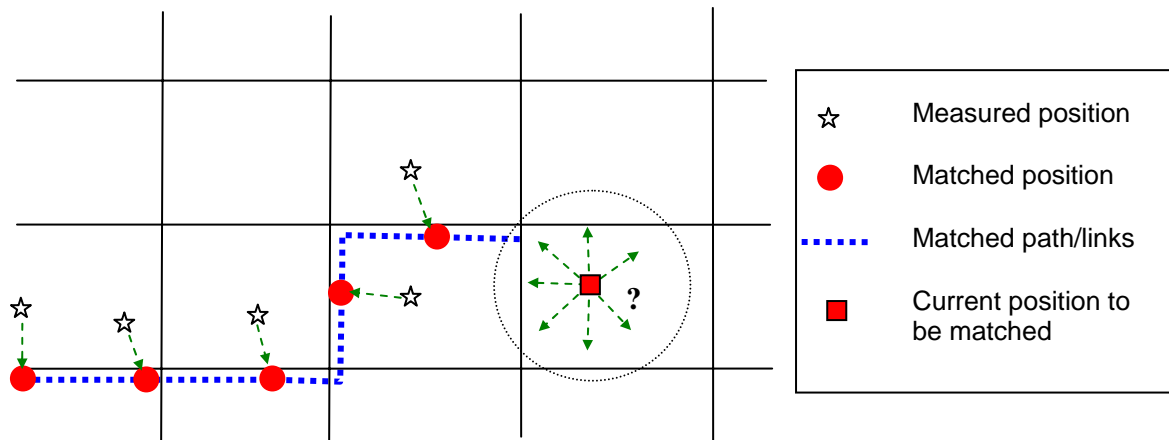


Figure 1: The problem of using mobile phones as probes

The attempt to identify autonomously the location of a moving vehicle began with the use of in-vehicle navigation systems during the last decade. The typical positioning components of those systems were global positioning system (GPS) and/or dead reckoning (DR). When these components are installed on a vehicle, the vehicle is able to determine its position. Knowing that the vehicle must be on the road network, the position is combined with a database of the road network, to estimate the vehicle's position on one of the road links.

The challenge in using this approach arises from the error contained within the position estimated by the positioning components. Typically, this error is sufficiently large that some *map matching* method for location estimation is required. With regard to this estimating method, many approaches have been proposed.

The simplest method (Streit et al., 1998) is to match the measured point to the closest link on the road network using the Euclidean distance metric (point-to-link match). It is true that this method may provide accurate estimates, however there is no assurance that it always gives proper estimates. Some other approaches (Kao and Huang, 1994; Scott and Drane, 1994 and 1995; Enescu and Sahli, 2002) introduced more sophisticated map-matching methods utilizing fuzzy logic or Kalman filtering. However, these methods make use of additional information such as vehicle heading, and are therefore generally not applicable when position estimates are obtained infrequently (i.e. on the order of 1 minute)

The earliest known North America operational test of the feasibility of obtaining vehicle location and travel time information tracking mobile phones occurred in 1996 (Virginia Department of

Transportation, 1997). However, the study concluded that the location referencing hardware was insufficiently reliable to permit an evaluation of the concept.

More recently, there have been reports that another field test is underway in Virginia. The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) and Virginia Department of Transportation (USDOT) have partnered to help fund a feasibility test of new technology under development by AirSage Inc of Georgia. This study is still in its beginning stages and no detailed information is yet available describing the proposed methods or test results.

While significant improvements have been made in the methods and technologies available for estimating the position of a mobile phone, the most accurate methods, such as GPS or DGPS (differential global positioning system) are not likely to be widely deployed over the next several years largely due to the cost, weight, and electrical power requirements of these systems. Consequently, the challenge is to develop a new location estimator that is applicable given the current position estimation error level.

While many of the existing map-matching methods are not appropriate for our purposes, some researches (Bernstein and A. Kornhauser, 1996; White, 2000) have proposed map-matching methods that we use as a starting point for our discussions. These researchers have proposed four different types of map-matching methods (including one similar to the point-to-link match method we introduced earlier). The difference between the four methods is the constraints that are introduced when considering the set of possible vehicle locations. These constraints reflect “topological information”, such as feasible vehicle speeds, road network topography and connectivity, etc. in reducing the location solution space. The use of these constraints provides results that are more accurate than the point-to-link match method.

Thus, in spite of the variety of the positioning components, the fact is that there is no definitive method to obtain a sufficiently accurate vehicle location. The work described in this paper identifies the context within which the authors are developing a new method for location estimation.

Limitation of Existing Methods and Remaining Issues

Noticeable efforts have been initiated in the past to examine the feasibility of using vehicles with a location reference system as probes to derive traffic conditions information. Most of these efforts however assume the availability of a vehicle-based location system such as GPS and Dead Reckoning and have mainly focused on the problem of map matching. Limited research has been undertaken to go beyond solving the location problem and derive traffic information based on a mobile phone-based location system with limited location accuracy and frequency. Despite the progress made in the past, a number of technical issues still remain to be addressed:

1. Errors in location estimates will create corresponding errors in the estimated average speeds or travel time. Furthermore, calculated speeds (or travel times) must be associated with a unique segment of roadway. Errors in the position measurement make this association difficult. This issue can be illustrated using a simple two vehicles example (vehicle *A* and *B*) as shown in Figure 2. Assume each vehicle contains a mobile phone. The true location of the phone is unknown, but the position returned from the LRS is accurate with some known error distribution (as indicated by the dashed circles centred on vehicle *A* and *B*). In this particular illustration, assume that the position returned by the LRS is given as the solid red circle. The challenge is to correctly determine which road segment each vehicle is traversing. Vehicle *A* is travelling on the freeway, but the

position measurement indicates it is on the parallel service road. Conversely, vehicle *B* is actually travelling on the parallel service road, but the position measurement indicates it is on the freeway.

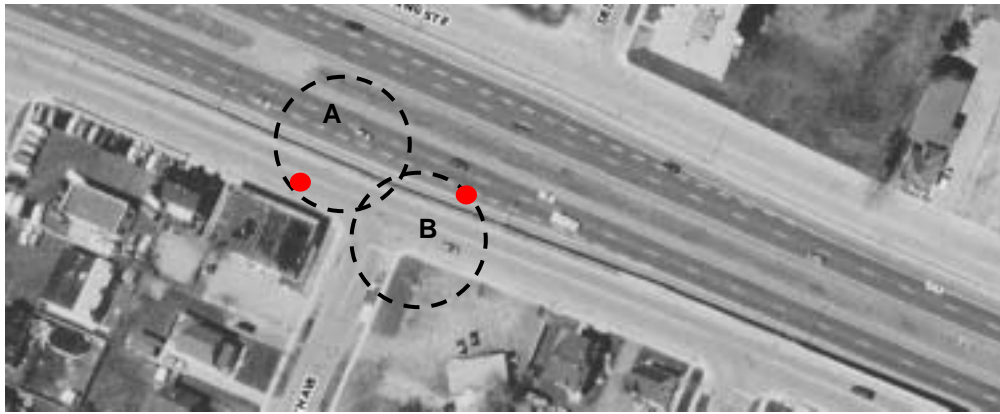


Figure 2: Effect of positioning error on map matching

2. As with all vehicle-based data collection methods, issues arise with respect to sample size and bias in the sample. These issues have been examined in the context of other probe-based applications (for example; Hellinga and Fu, 2002; Hellinga and Gudapati, 2000; and Hellinga and Fu, 1999), but will need to be examined in this context as well. In particular, it would be important to develop relationships that permit the estimating of the sample size required to achieve some desired level of reliability in the travel time estimates (or conversely, relationships that permit the estimation of the reliability for a given sample size).
3. Sampling frequency will likely be constrained by the number of mobile units sampled and the LRS system characteristics. Less frequent sampling of a mobile unit's position may reduce communication system loadings, but also provides a lower level of spatial resolution in terms of traffic condition data. The explicit trade-off will depend on the characteristics and constraints of the LRS and communication system.

For example, consider the hypothetical road network shown in Figure 3. The bold arrow indicates the actual path of a vehicle through the network. The red circles indicate the position data obtained from the mobile phone in this vehicle at a relatively frequent polling interval. The solid red circles represent the position data obtained from the same mobile phone at a polling interval that is only 10% as frequent. It is significantly more difficult to determine traffic conditions on the basis of only two location observations than it is on the basis of more location observations primarily because the vehicle's path between the two observation locations is not known. The uncertainty associated with the path a vehicle has used increases with the distance (and therefore time) between successive location observations.

4. It incorporates the concept of confidence level of matched points, which aims to make the estimation more reliable.

A simulation model is being developed to evaluate existing and proposed map matching algorithms. The inputs to the simulation model include network data and parameters to characterize the LRS. The model simulates the movement of a given vehicle traveling along a randomly generated route and records relevant information such as true positions and links, “measured” positions generated along the input parameters, matched links and matched positions.

For the purpose of illustration, a small-scale sensitivity analysis is performed to examine several critical factors that might influence the performance of a map matching algorithm. The performance is measured by matching rate defined as the percentage of matched links that are correctly identified by the algorithm. The random network is simulated which includes 146 nodes and 363 links with an average link length of 105 meters. As described previously, the accuracy of a map matching algorithm depends to a large extent on the accuracy of the position acquisition system. Figure 4 shows the relationship between the percentage of correctly matched links and the standard deviation of position error of the mobile phone tracking system. As expected, the performance of the map matching algorithm is inversely related to the position error.

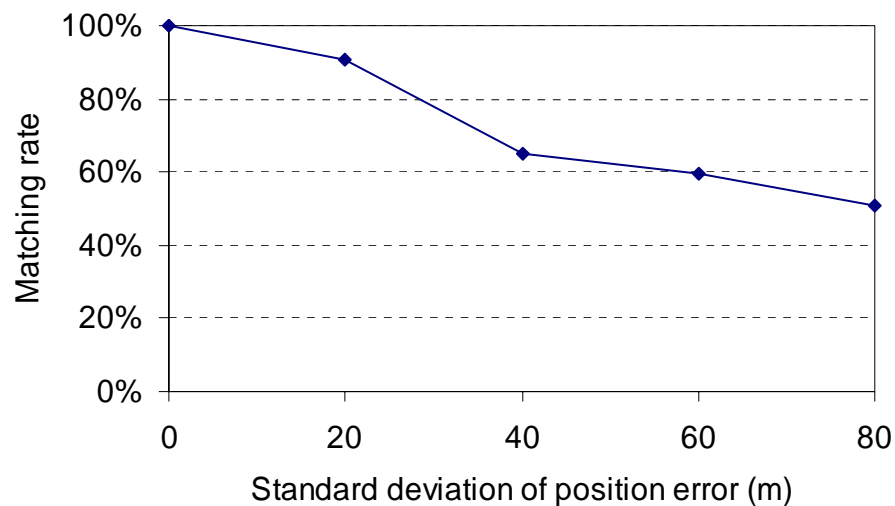


Figure 4: Matching rate as a function of position error

In contrast, the matching rate is not singly related to the location sampling frequency and could increase or decrease as the sampling interval increases. This unexpected result could be attributed to the definition of the matching performance - matching rate, which considers the number of the measurement points, instead of the number of links on the traversed path, as a basis. It should be noted that the total number of sampled points decreases as the sampling interval increases, which will hinder the subsequent steps involving identification of the traveling path of the vehicle and estimation of the corresponding travel time.

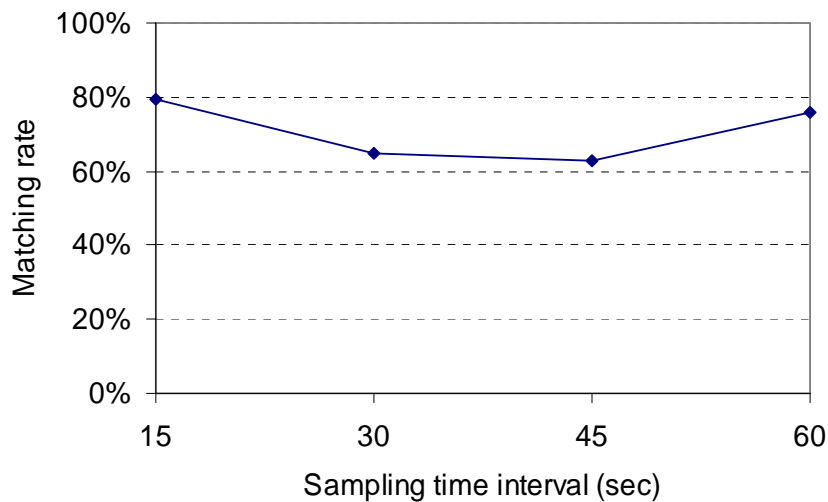


Figure 5: Matching rate as a function of position sampling frequency

Concluding Remarks

The potential of being able to obtain traffic information from mobile phone tracking is enormous: it will practically turn a large portion of vehicles on road into probes, making it possible to monitor real time traffic conditions throughout the whole network and over all time periods without the need for an infrastructure-intensive traffic surveillance system. There is however a number of challenges that need to be overcome before such potential can be realized. Main issues include large positioning errors, low sampling frequency, dense road network and wide variety of vehicle behaviours. Research is currently underway at the University of Waterloo to develop new models and algorithms that can provide reliable estimates on the travel time, speed and other traffic conditions variables based on the location history of mobile phones. Preliminary research results indicated that many of the issues can be resolved by integrating multiple data sources with advanced pattern recognition and state estimation techniques.

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