

Condition Monitoring of Rail Infrastructure and Rolling Stock using Acceleration Sensor Data of on-Rail Freight Wagons

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Abstract: In various industry sectors all over the world, the ongoing digital transformation helps to unlock benefits for individual components, involved processes, stakeholders as well as the overarching system (e.g., the national economy). In this context, the rail transport sector can particularly benefit from the increased prevalence of sensor systems and the thereby increased availability of related data. As rail transport, by nature, is an integrated transport mode that contains both freight and passenger transport within the same transport network, benefits achieved for the service quality of freight transport also lead to improvements for passenger transport (e.g., punctuality or uptime of rolling stock). This technical paper presents a method to monitor the condition of the existing rail infrastructure as well as the rolling stock by obtaining insights from raw sensor data (e.g., locations and acceleration data). The data is collected with telemetry-units (i.e. multiple sensors integrated with a telematics device to enable data transmission) mounted on a fleet of on-rail freight wagons. In addition, the proposed method is applied to an exemplary set of extracted real-world data.

1 INTRODUCTION

Decreasing sensor costs lead to an increasing prevalence of sensor systems as well as an increasing availability of related data. Coupled with advancements in the context of technologies and methods to handle *Big Data*, this development provides the foundation to exploit individual as well as systematic benefits in the course of associated transformation processes (i.e. *Digital Transformation*) – a paradigm, that can be observed in various industry sectors such as manufacturing (e.g., Zhong et al., 2017), construction (e.g., Otte, Zhou, et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020), policy-making (e.g., Otte, Fenollar Solvay, & Meisen, 2020; Otte, Gannouni, & Meisen, 2020; Otte & Meisen, 2021), or education (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016).

One sector that is expected to benefit from the above-mentioned paradigm is the rail transport sector (cf. Deutsche Bahn AG, 2021). Rail transport is,

among others, characterized by comparatively high transport capacities per transport unit. This characteristic also lays the foundation for achieving comparatively high production extents of transport volume – i.e. of passenger km (pkm) with regard to passenger transport and/or ton km (tkm) with regard to freight transport.

Consequently, especially in regions with large-scale rail networks (cf. length, density) for short and long-distance transport, rail transport is a sector of particularly pronounced economic relevance. In Germany, for example, the produced rail transport volume grew between 2014 and 2019 for both passenger (approx. +10% from 91 bn pkm to >100,4 bn pkm) and freight transport (approx. +15% from 115 bn tkm to >132,8 bn tkm) (BMVI, 2020).

Since rail transport, by nature, is an integrated transport mode (cf. freight and passengers in the same transport network), benefits that are obtained for single transport volume shares (e.g., freight), directly

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benefit not only the overall system but also the further transport volume shares (e.g., passengers). Following this overarching hypothesis, one key objective of the project *QUISS* is to develop data-based applications using modern data science approaches to detect possible failures (e.g., of the rail infrastructure or freight wagons) at an early stage by detecting patterns and anomalies in data (BMVI, 2021). As a result of subsequently reduced operational disruptions, the rail transport system as a whole will benefit from this through an increased service quality (e.g., punctuality) for customers (BMVI, 2021).

QUISS is carried out in a collaboration between research and industry. One contributing industry partner – among others – is the *DB Cargo AG* (i.e. the business unit for rail freight transport of the *Deutsche Bahn AG*), a company that operates a fleet of approx. 90,000 freight wagons and 3,400 locomotives (DB Cargo AG, 2019). In the current roll-out stage, 65,000 freight wagons are going to be equipped with telemetry-units containing multiple sensors such as triaxial accelerometers – to date, approx. 94% (i.e. approx. 61,000) of this sub-set of the overall freight wagon fleet is already equipped.

The availability of related sensor data paves the way for the use case ‘acceleration-based infrastructure monitoring’, which enables the monitoring of both rail infrastructure and rolling stock without impairing the day-to-day business. For additional information about flanking use cases within the project *QUISS*, see (Otte, Bartels, et al., 2020) and (Posada Moreno et al., 2020; Posada Moreno et al., 2022)). In this paper, we present a method to obtain insights and information advantages from raw data (e.g., locations, acceleration data) that was gathered from telemetry-units mounted on a fleet of on-rail freight wagons. Furthermore, we apply the proposed method on an exemplary set of real-world freight wagon movement data and end with a conclusion on related benefits for multiple involved stakeholders (e.g., infrastructure providers, wagon fleet operators).

2 RELATED WORK

Already in the early 1970s, research has been conducted and presented concerning the relationship of freight wagon movement and related technical issues (e.g., vibration, shocks) (Roggeveen, 1972; Scales, 1971; Simmons & Shackson, 1971). Since then, advancements in the field of information and communications technology (e.g., sensor systems, broadband communication, availability of

computational resources) have enabled to conduct further computer-aided analyses in order to gain further insights into the analyzed aspects.

To obtain an overview of the existing related work in this specific research domain, we conducted a targeted literature analysis by applying pre-defined keyword set combinations (cf. Table 1) for an advanced search in *Web of Science Core Collection* (*Web of Science Group, 2020*) (date: 2nd March; time-span: all-time; data field: ‘title’ OR ‘keywords’). At this point, it should be highlighted that a different scope of the literature collection (e.g., further databases, further keywords) might lead to additional candidates for the related work analysis.

The keyword set combinations represent permutations of the following three fundamental keyword sets:

KW Set I (Context): TI=((rail* OR wagon* OR train*) AND (freight* OR cargo*)) OR AK=((rail* OR wagon* OR train*) AND (freight* OR cargo*))

KW Set II (Digitalization): TI=(digit* OR telem* OR internet* OR IoT* OR data*) OR AK=(digit* OR telem* OR internet* OR IoT* OR data*)

KW Set III (Use Case): TI=(shock* OR impact* OR vibr* OR accel*) OR AK=(shock* OR impact* OR vibr* OR accel*)

Table 1: Applied KW set combinations.

| # | Description | n (collected)* |
|----|------------------|----------------|
| IV | I AND II | 68 |
| V | I AND III | 105 |
| VI | I AND II AND III | 2 |

* For further information on the collected initial corpus, please contact the corresponding author.

In the next step, we selected the related works by analyzing the titles and, if needed, the abstracts and/or the full-text until the collected information were sufficient for the decision whether to consider the analyzed paper as related to our work.

The overall corpus of papers contains contributions to various sub-domains of rail freight transport (RFT). Among others, these are the design and/or evaluation (e.g., profitability; energy efficiency; safety) of the transport system (e.g., emissions; resilience), rail network (e.g., multi-modal interaction), rolling stock (e.g., arrival time predictions) or single components (e.g., sensor and control systems) as well as inter-component interactions (e.g., brake-wheel; wheel-rail).

To select contributions that are directly related to our work, we derived the following exclusion criteria: (1) objective (e.g., financial impact assessment); (2)

scope (e.g., single component analysis or component-component interaction analyses); (3) perspective (e.g., maintenance or intervention strategies); (4) approach (e.g., component development, modal analyses, material flow analyses). In case more than one exclusion criterion was eligible to be assigned, we decided based on the most decisive criterion.

As a result of the above-described selection process, the following works could be identified as directly related to our work:

Table 2: Related work.

| Reference | Focus |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brezulianu et al., 2020 | control parameters monitoring (real-time) for freight fleets |
| Ußler et al., 2019 | multi-sensor system telematics platform for freight wagons |
| Behrends et al., 2016; Galonske et al., 2016 | telematics-based information services in RFT |
| Reason et al., 2010 | sensor-enabled telemetry within freight trains |
| Chiocchio et al., 2016 | cloud-based platform for freight train fleet management |
| Aimar & Soma, 2017 | sensor-enabled condition monitoring of freight wagons |
| Macucci et al., 2015 | sensor-enabled derailment detection within freight trains |

As one central outcome of the conducted literature analysis, we can conclude that the suggested methodological approach embodies a novel contribution to the considered research domain. By combining the suggested method with a first-time application on real-world data, we emphasize the feasibility of the approach and enable both researchers as well as practitioners to reflect on the transferability and expandability of our approach to further applications (e.g., other economic sectors).

3 DATA SET AND METHOD

3.1 Overview: Data

The telemetry-units (battery-powered) are mounted on freight wagons and collect data from incorporated sensor modules (e.g., acceleration sensors, GPS modules) as well as fuse them with existing meta data (e.g., sensor system provider, wagon and train identification numbers).

Among others, the sensor systems collect geospatial temporal data (e.g., latitude, longitude, instantaneous velocity) as well as additional data about pre-defined events and send the collected data to a data lake in a periodic fashion (i.e. every ten minutes when moving, otherwise every 24 hours) and in an event-triggered fashion.

From the perspective of the considered use case, the events of interest are ‘shocks’. Shock events are classified by processing measurements of the available acceleration sensors in all spatial directions. As soon as a configurable threshold value for one of the three directions is exceeded, the acceleration data is recorded and the according event is classified as a shock event. Moreover, the data entry is enriched with a corresponding position measurement and timestamp.

The results obtained in this paper are based on an extract of the entire data set provided by the company-internal *splunk*-system (cf. Splunk, 2021) and comprises the movement of 60 different wagons over six months (May to October 2020). The wagons were selected by calculating the average daily shock rates for the first month (May 2020) and clustering the results into pre-defined percentage ranges spanning over the prevalent range of daily shock rates. Finally, an equal number of wagons has been selected from each percentage range with the boundary condition that they moved on as many days as possible.

The period contains 292,586 entries in total. The heatmap visualization in Figure 1 illustrates the geographic extent of the extracted data set.

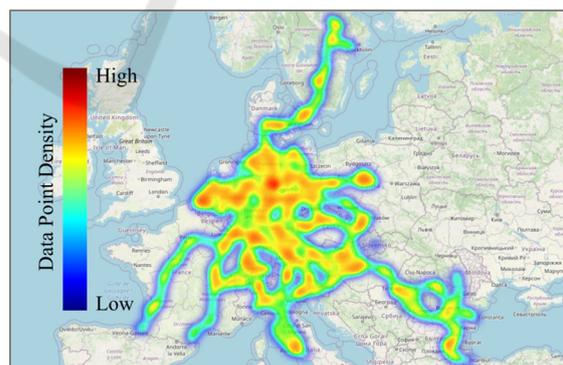


Figure 1: Geographic extent of extracted data set.

3.2 Overview: Method

The utilized data analytics pipeline consists of six steps starting with two pre-processing steps and continuing with three processing steps as well as one post-processing step:

- (1) Read-In;
- (2) Filtering;
- (3) Shock Analysis;
- (4) Anomaly Detection;
- (5) Cluster Detection;
- (6) Reverse Geocoding.

If desired, additional steps can be integrated into the pipeline to gain further insights from the analyzed data set.

4 RESULTS

Building upon the description of the dataset as well as the proposed method, we subsequently describe and execute the afore-mentioned sequence of single process steps (cf. sub-sections 4.1 to 4.6).

4.1 Step 1: Read-in

In the context of the presented proof of concept, the raw data files (e.g., daily or monthly extracts) are obtained from the *splunk* system in the form of ‘comma-separated values’-files (*.csv) and merged into one data frame (cf. Pandas, 2021) before being saved accordingly for further processing.

4.2 Step 2: Filtering

The filtering process contains two sub-steps: position and velocity filtering. First, the position filtering removes data points with duplicate entries and missing (e.g., due to lost GPS signal) or default position information (e.g., due to set up and initial operation process of the telemetry-unit).

Second, approximate mean velocities are calculated by applying an Euler backward difference scheme on the position information and the corresponding timestamps within the remaining data points. The geospatial difference is approximated by the Haversine formula using the latitude and longitude coordinates and the average radius of the earth.

Subsequently, to ensure the physical plausibility of prevalent velocities, calculated or measured velocities greater than a pre-defined threshold were filtered. Obtained from discussions with involved domain experts, this threshold was set to 125 km/h. As a positive side effect of this filtering process, ensuring physically plausible velocities actively reduces the probability to cause false positives in the anomaly detection step (cf. sub-section 4.4). Table 3

summarizes the numerical effect of the filtering process on the analyzed data set.

Table 3: Filtering overview.

| Characteristic | Value |
|----------------------------------------|---------|
| Number of data points before filtering | 292,586 |
| Number of data points after filtering | 275,207 |
| Share of filtered data points | 5.94% |

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of measured and calculated velocities. The mean of the calculated distribution is smaller than the mean of the measured one, whereas the overall shape and tendency of both distributions seem in good agreement. The underestimation tendency for the calculated velocities in comparison with the measured ones can be attributed to the calculation method, as the driven path length is estimated as the direct great circle connection between two successive geospatial data points on a sphere, thus ignoring the actual railway course.

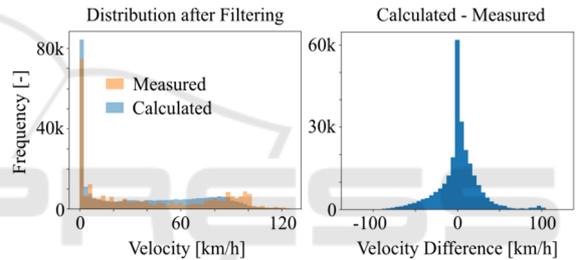


Figure 2: Distribution of measured and calculated velocities.

4.3 Step 3: Shock Analysis

The shock analysis is divided into two parts: the full time span shock analysis and the daily shock analysis.

4.3.1 Full Time Span

The full time span shock analysis iterates over each wagon and over the entire time span of the data set and calculates various shock-related measures. Table 4 and Table 5 provide an overview of the suggested absolute and relative measures.

Table 4: Full time span shock measures (absolute).

| Measure | Description |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| max_num_shocks_per_train | Maximal number of shocks detected for a train pulling the wagon until train is changed. |
| num_events | Total number of events for the wagon over the entire time span. |

Table 4: Full time span shock measures (absolute) (cont.).

| Measure | Description |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| num_shocks | Total number of shocks resp. shock events for the wagon over the entire time span. |
| num_trains | Total number of trains used for pulling the wagon. If a train is exchanged in the past and the same train is used at a later point in time, this train counts twice. Therefore, each train change counts. |
| num_unique_trains | Total number of unique trains used for pulling the wagon. The same train pulling the wagon at a later point of time does not count multiple times. |
| num_trains_shock | Total number of trains with at least one shock. Every single train change counts (cf. num_trains) and it is checked for shocks until the next train change happens. |
| num_unique_shock_trains | Total number of unique trains used for pulling the wagon with at least one shock event. |
| num_days_driven | Total number of days the wagon has been pulled by a train. |
| num_shock_days | Total number of days the wagon has been pulled by a train and at least one shock has been detected on the corresponding day. |

Table 5: Full time span shock measures (relative).

| Measure | Calculation |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| shock_rate_per_event | $\frac{\text{num_shocks}}{\text{num_events}}$ |
| shock_rate_per_train | $\frac{\text{num_trains_shock}}{\text{num_trains}}$ |
| shock_rate_per_day | $\frac{\text{num_shock_days}}{\text{num_days_driven}}$ |
| day_driven_per_total_days | $\frac{\text{num_days_driven}}{\text{num_days_df}}$ |

4.3.2 Daily

The daily shock analysis iterates over each wagon and over each day of the entire time span of the data set and calculates the number of data points per day, the number of shocks per day, and the number of trains pulling the wagon (cf. Table 6). Based on that, the

daily shock rate for each wagon is determined as the quotient of the total number of shocks and the total number of entries on the corresponding day.

Table 6: Daily shock measures (absolute).

| Measure | Description |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| num_entries | Total number of entries on this day. |
| num_trains | Total number of different trains of the wagon on this day. |
| num_shocks | Total number of shocks on this day. |

4.3.3 Full Time Span vs. Daily

The full time span shock analysis offers an overview of the entire data set, while in contrast to that, the daily shock analysis provides time-dependent measures, which in turn can be used in further pipeline steps, e.g., detecting anomalies in the analyzed data set.

4.4 Step 4: Anomaly Detection

As Figure 3 illustrates, our definition of an anomaly is motivated by the hypothesis that level shifts within the temporal progression of the daily shock rate can be attributed to events that directly have an impact on the condition of the rail infrastructure or the rolling stock (e.g., maintenance events, sub-optimal railway conditions, improper wagon handling). Contrarily, non-anomalous wear and tear (e.g., of wagon material or the rail infrastructure) is assumed to lead to a comparatively gradual and continuous daily shock rate growth.

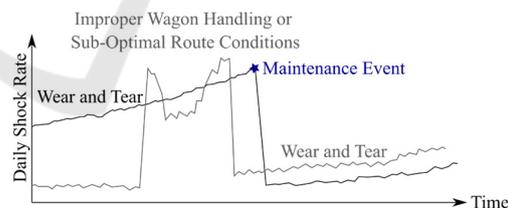


Figure 3: Schematic sketch of hypothesis for anomaly detection.

To detect level shift anomalies in the daily shock rates, the LevelShiftAD anomaly detection algorithm (taken from the *Python ADTK package* - see ARUNDO ADTK, 2020a) is applied. The algorithm was selected because it is not sensitive to instantaneous spikes and suitable for frequently occurring noisy outliers. The selected parameter settings are documented in Table 7. For additional information on the algorithm and parameters, see (ARUNDO ADTK, 2020b).

When an anomalous day for a wagon is detected, all data points of the corresponding day and wagon are classified as anomalous.

Table 7: LevelShiftAD parameters.

| Parameter | Value |
|-----------|--------|
| c | 6 |
| window | 5 |
| side | 'both' |

4.5 Step 5: Cluster Detection

After performing the anomaly detection, a clustering analysis is carried out – optionally of the shock events or the anomalous events. For the clustering analysis, the *scikit-learn* implementation of the DBSCAN (i.e. Density-Based Spatial Clustering of Applications with Noise) algorithm is utilized. The parameters are selected in a way that the cluster size is in the order of the size of the detected shock cluster (e.g., industrial plant, railway station).

The selected settings for all non-default DBSCAN parameters are summarized in Table 8. For additional information on the algorithm and parameters, see (scikit.learn, 2021).

Table 8: DBSCAN parameters.

| Parameter | Value |
|-------------|------------------------------|
| eps in km | 1 (eps in km / radius earth) |
| min_samples | 10 |
| algorithm | 'ball tree' |
| metric | 'haversine' |

An exemplary result for the described anomaly detection followed by a subsequent cluster detection and analysis after their application on the analyzed real-world dataset is presented in Figure 4.

The shock cluster ranking is based on the full dataset (i.e. 60 wagons), whereas the highlighted anomaly detection results are presented for two selected wagons that both traveled through the first-ranked shock cluster. Some data points of one of the wagons are classified as anomalous, while the data points of the other wagon are completely anomalous-free. Due to data privacy reasons, the depiction does not contain underlying map information.

Remarkably, most of the anomalous data points belong to the connection between the first and second-ranked shock clusters, in which the wagon is traveling multiple times during the entire time span of the data set (six months). Furthermore, three anomaly data points are detected west of the main anomalous route, which are most probably caused by a singular route change between clusters one and two.

The shock clusters #1 and #2 can be geographically mapped to industrial plants, while clusters #9 and #10 can be assigned to one railway station and one marshaling yard respectively.

Figure 5 depicts a graphical representation of the real-world data from the wagon that moved between cluster #1 and #2 (cf. Figure 4). The figure does not only depict the temporal progression of the daily shock rate throughout the overall time span of the analyzed data set but also highlights the absolute number of pulling trains to which the wagon had been assigned to. Furthermore, it enables the immediate deduction of two further information: first, the share of missing days (e.g., due to wagon idling or missing signal transmission), and second, the extent of anomalous days. The latter is of particular importance for fleet operators as this information indicates promising focal points for further in-depth analysis (e.g., traveled routes, involved business users).

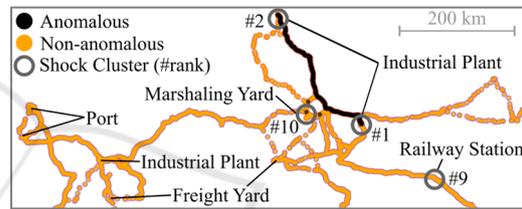


Figure 4: Map plot of two exemplary freight wagons.

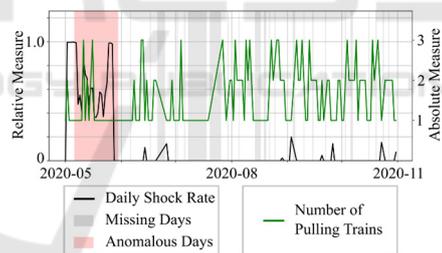


Figure 5: Wagon-specific data representation.

4.6 Step 6: Reverse Geocoding

For the presented example, the pipeline is completed by a ‘reverse geocoding’-step to map the latitude and longitude data to the corresponding country code, administrative region (cf. state, sub-state), and the closest city. For this final and offline reverse geocoding process, we utilized the *Python* package called ‘reverse_geocoder’.

As the analyzed real-world data set was not homogenous with regard to the share of data points per country traveled, Table 9 represents an extract from the overall statistical analysis to avoid highly misleading conclusions (e.g., inter-country comparisons).

Table 9: Extract from statistical analysis.

| Country | % of Data Set | Shocks | Anomalies |
|---------|---------------|--------|-----------|
| DE | 72.12 % | 5.89% | 4.09% |

Building upon this initial analysis, further insights can be obtained through multiple paths such as an in-depth statistical analysis (e.g., shock rates per country, anomaly rates per country). These insights can be utilized as input parameters for future needs for action – e.g., in the form of rankings and resulting priorities for regions. Furthermore, subsequent analysis steps can be implemented based on prevalent individual requirements (e.g., objective of analysis; configuration of data set).

5 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In the present paper, we showed how raw data from multiple sensor systems mounted on freight wagons can be used to monitor the condition of the prevalent rail infrastructure as well as the rolling stock. Consequently, equipping a fleet of freight (and/or passenger) wagons with according telemetry-units extends it to a moving sensor network that provides not only momentary or short-term but also long-term information about the transport system itself.

It has to be emphasized that the obtained results are not to be understood as direct causalities (e.g., level shift in daily shock rate → damaged infrastructure or improper handling of material). Instead, each of the data-based findings serves as an indication and a starting point from which to carry out further in-depth data analyses or to apply additional investigation methods (e.g., Alippi et al., 2000). When interpreting the results obtained, the integration of human expert knowledge of the application domain is essential, just as it is when guiding through and performing subsequent in-depth analyses.

Based on our present paper, future work should address the following aspects in particular: a systematic in-depth analysis of individual wagon numbers and clusters of similar wagons; enrichment with additional data sources (e.g., maintenance plans), implementation of further steps to the analytics pipeline and transnational stakeholder exchange (e.g., infrastructure providers, fleet operators).

Considering the context of large (freight) wagon fleets (cf. multiple millions of data points per calendar week), special attention should be paid to the automation (e.g., computing frequency), scalability (e.g., parallel computing), and efficiency (e.g., resource-efficient programming) of the

computational operations to pave the way towards an industrial usage of the suggested method.

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