# Medians and Beyond: New Aggregation Techniques for Sensor Networks

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## ABSTRACT

Wireless sensor networks offer the potential to span and monitor large geographical areas inexpensively. Sensors, however, have significant power constraint (battery life), making communication very expensive. Another important issue in the context of sensor-based information systems is that individual sensor readings are inherently unreliable. In order to address these two aspects, sensor database systems like TinyDB and Cougar enable in-network data aggregation to reduce the communication cost and improve reliability. The existing data aggregation techniques, however, are limited to relatively simple types of queries such as `SUM, COUNT, AVG,` and `MIN/MAX`. In this paper we propose a data aggregation scheme that significantly extends the class of queries that can be answered using sensor networks. These queries include (approximate) quantiles, such as the median, the most frequent data values, such as the *consensus* value, a histogram of the data distribution, as well as range queries. In our scheme, each sensor aggregates the data it has received from other sensors into a fixed (user specified) size message. We provide strict theoretical guarantees on the approximation quality of the queries in terms of the message size. We evaluate the performance of our aggregation scheme by simulation and demonstrate its accuracy, scalability and low resource utilization for highly variable input data sets.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.2.4 [**Systems**]: Distributed databases, Query processing

## General Terms

Algorithms

## Keywords

Sensor Networks, Aggregation, Approximation Algorithms, Distributed Algorithms

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the advances in hardware miniaturization and integration, it is possible to design tiny sensor devices that combine sensing with computation, storage, and communication. Availability of such devices has made it possible to deploy them in a networked setting for applications such as wildlife habitat monitoring [10], wild-fire prevention [7], and environmental monitoring [16]. As new sensing devices are developed, it is envisioned that sensor networks will be used in a large number of civil and military applications. Going beyond traditional temperature, sound or magnetic sensors, a next generation of sensor technology is emerging which can sense far more diverse physical variables. In particular, highly sensitive and selective biological/chemical sensors are in development for rapid detection of hazardous biological and chemical agents [2, 3].

In order to support advanced sensing technology, it is necessary to develop information and communication infrastructure in which such sensors can be gainfully deployed. The MICA2 mote (available from Crossbow Technology [5]) with TinyOS operating system [14] developed at UC Berkeley represents a typical building block of such an infrastructure. The key characteristic of MICA2 motes is that it is severely limited in terms of computation capabilities, communication bandwidth, and battery power. Another issue is the inherent unreliability of the sensing functionality. Although as a first order of approximation, sensor networks comprising multiple sensor nodes can be viewed as a distributed system or a network of computers, the limited capabilities of individual sensor nodes necessitate a careful design of both the communication and information infrastructure. Although hardware advances are likely to result in reducing the footprint of such devices even more, the limitations and unreliability will continue to remain. Numerous efforts are in progress to build sensor networks that will be effective for a broad range of applications [14].

Most common mode in which sensors and sensor networks are deployed is in the context of monitoring and detection of critical events in a physical environment. Typically, each sensor node collects data from its physical environment and this data needs to be delivered to the users through the network interconnection for further analysis. The simplest way this can be accomplished is to let each sensor node deliver its data periodically to the host computer, referred to as the *base station*, where the data can be assembled for subsequent analysis. This approach, however, is wasteful since it results in excessive communication. When combined with the fact that transmitting one bit over radio is at least three orders of magnitude more expensive in terms of energy consumption than executing a single instruction, alternative approaches are clearly warranted. In order to address this problem, proposals have been made to exploit the multi-hop routing protocols in sensor networks in such a way that messages from multiple nodes are combined enroute from the sensor nodes to the base station [11]. Routing in such a network can be visualized as a routing tree with the base station as the root and nodes sending messages up the tree towards the root. Although this approach does reduce the number of messages, it still suffers from the problem of larger message sizes as information passes through the routing tree from the leaf nodes to the root node, i.e., the base station.

Researchers at UC Berkeley [18, 17] (TinyDB project) and Cornell University [24] (Cougar) have developed energy efficient query processing architectures over sensor networks. Their approach is based on a couple of observations : first, for a user, the individual sensor values do not hold much value. For example, in a sensor network spanning thousands of nodes, the user would like to know the average temperature of an extended region which might span a large number of sensors. Second, extracting all the data out of a sensor network is very inefficient in terms of bandwidth and power usage. It is much more efficient to gather an overview of the total range of data with aggregate measures such as `AVERAGE, SUM, COUNT`, and `MIN/MAX`. In addition to energy benefits, aggregation can help us reduce the effects of error in sensor readings. Individual sensor readings are inherently unreliable and, therefore, taking an average of multiple sensor values gives a more accurate picture of the true physical data value. Based on these considerations the Cougar and TinyDB architectures have proposed using *in-network aggregation* to compute such aggregates over the routing tree, minimizing both the number of messages as well as the size of the messages. Note that measures such as `MIN` and `MAX` are not strictly aggregate measures and are indeed singleton sensor values. They are however easy to compute in the same data aggregation framework.

Although aggregation measures such as `AVERAGE` and `SUM` are sufficient in many applications, there are situations when they may not be enough. In particular, in the context of biological and chemical sensors, individual readings can be highly unreliable and even a handful of outliers can introduce large errors in single aggregate values such as `AVERAGE` and `SUM`. For example, the electronic nose project [2] based on chemical sensors deploys a large sensor array for detecting chemical agents. The distribution of values on the array is used as a chemical signature to classify the agent as being safe or unsafe. In such environments, we envision that it is important not only to estimate single-valued aggregate measure but also estimate the distribution of the sensor values. By having the estimate of the data distribution available at the base station, users can pose more complex queries and perform more sophisticated analysis by computing median, quantiles, and consensus measures. Our goal in this paper is to develop techniques that would enable such an estimate of data distribution of sensor values be available at the base station in an energy efficient manner while providing strict error guarantees.

Although measures such as `AVERAGE` and `MEDIAN` seem very similar at first glance, the amounts of resource required to compute them are very different. To compute `AVERAGE`, every node sends two integers to its parent, one representing the sum of all data values of its children and the other is the total number of its children [17]. In other words, `AVERAGE` can be computed by using constant memory and by sending constant sized messages. On the other hand, to answer a `MEDIAN` query accurately, we need to keep track of all distinct values and thus the message size and memory required to store it grows linearly with the size of the network. To get around this difficulty we focus on *approximation* schemes to answer quantile and related queries. For most sensor network applications 100% accuracy is not necessary and our approximation scheme can be adapted to meet any user specified tolerance at the expense of higher memory and bandwidth consumption. To this end, we introduce Quantile Digest or q-digest : a novel data structure which provides provable guarantees on approximation error and maximum resource consumption. In more concrete terms, if the values returned by the sensors are integers in the range $[1, \sigma]$, then using q-digest we can answer quantile queries using message size $m$ within an error of $\mathcal{O}(\log(\sigma)/m)$. We also outline how we can use q-digest to answer other queries such as range queries, most frequent items and histograms. Another notable property of q-digest is that in addition to the theoretical worst case bound error, the structure carries with itself an estimate of error for this *particular* query.

The organization of the rest of the paper is as follows. In section 2 we discuss the model we shall be working with and some related work. Section 3 is devoted a to a detailed description of q-digest and how it performs in-network data aggregation. In section 4, we shall show how one can query q-digest to obtain quantities of interest. Then in section 5 we move on to an experimental evaluation of our scheme under various inputs. Finally we discuss extensions to q-digest and outline directions for future work.

# 2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

We consider a network of $n$ sensor devices, where all devices are sensing in a common modality. Without loss of generality, each sensor's reading is assumed to be an integer value in the range $[1, \sigma]$, where $\sigma$ is the maximum possible value of the signal. The network contains a special node, called base station, which is responsible for initiating the query, and collecting the data from the sensors. When a query is initiated by the base station, the sensors organize themselves in a spanning tree, rooted at the base station, which acts as the routing tree for sensors to propagate their signal values towards the base station. Actually a routing tree is not essential to our purposes; the only requirements we impose on the routing scheme is that there be no routing loops and no duplicate packets. The routing tree can be used for query dissemination as well. In this paper, we assume that the links between sensor nodes are reliable (no packets are lost), and focus exclusively on the data aggregation problem.

An aggregate such as `MEDIAN` is intrinsically more difficult to compute than `MIN`, `MAX`, or `AVERAGE`. In fact, under the natural assumption that each sensor only forwards a fixed amount of data, it is easy to argue that one cannot calculate the median (or any other quantile) precisely. Imagine, for instance, a simple situation where sensor $A$ calculates the median based on the medians received from two other sensors $B$ and $C$. Even if $B$ and $C$ know the exact median of their own data, there is an inherent uncertainty in $A$'s computation: $A$ doesn't know the rank of $B$'s median in dataset of $C$ and vice-versa. If $B$ and $C$ aggregate data from $n$ sensors each, then $A$'s estimate of the combined median can have error of $n/2$ in the worst case.

This argument shows that, with the in-network aggregation model, only an approximation of the `MEDIAN`, or quantiles, is possible. Our scheme, in fact, shows the best possible approximation quality (asymptotically), and offers a trade-off between the message size and the error guarantee.

## 2.1 Related Work

The problems of decentralized routing, network maintenance and data aggregation in sensor networks have led to novel research challenges in networking, databases, and algorithms [15, 6]. In terms of providing database queries over sensor networks, TinyDB [18] at UC Berkeley and Cougar [24] at Cornell University are the two major efforts. They provide algorithms for many interesting aggregates such as `MAX`, `MIN`, `AVERAGE`, `SUM`, `COUNT`. For queries such as MEDIAN, TinyDB does not perform any aggregation; all data is delivered to the base station where MEDIAN is calculated centrally [17]. Approximate aggregation schemes for more complex queries such as contours and wavelet histograms have been proposed for the TinyDB system [12]. These algorithms perform fairly well in practice, but they do not provide any strict bounds on error. Zhao et al. [25] have also suggested algorithms for constructing summaries like MAX, AVG. The focus of their work is however more on network monitoring and maintenance, rather than database query. Considine et. al. [4] have discussed how to compute COUNT, SUM, AVERAGE in a robust fashion in the presence of failures such as lost and duplicate packets. Przydatek et. al. [21] have discussed secure ways to aggregate data, but with only one aggregating node. To our knowledge, this work is the first to provide efficient approximate algorithm for queries like quantiles, consensus and range.

The data streams community has also dealt with very similar problems where queries on large amounts of data need to be answered with limited memory. In the data stream model, the data is not stored and hence can be examined only once. In sensor networks the data is stored, but is distributed. In the context of data streams, Greenwald and Khanna [8] have proposed an efficient approximation algorithm for computing quantiles. Manku and Motwani [19] have provided approximate algorithms for finding frequent items. A recent work by Hershberger et al. [13] can be used to compute quantile and frequent items. Since this paper was submitted, Greenwald and Khanna [9] have proposed a distributed sensor network algorithm to find approximate quantiles using message size $m$ within an error of $\mathcal{O}(\log^2(n)/m)$. The similarity between the problems that arise in sensor networks and data streams suggest that it will be a fruitful avenue of research to exploit the insights gathered on one field on the other one.

# 3. THE QUANTILE DIGEST

A query processing framework for a sensor database needs to support both single valued queries such as AVG as well as more complex queries like HISTOGRAM. Using the TinyDB framework, many single valued queries can be answered accurately with minimal resource usage.

In order to support more complex query functionality, we propose a new summary structure, referred to as the q-digest (quantile digest), which captures the distribution of sensor data approximately. q-digest has several interesting properties which allow it to be used in different ways.

1. *Error-Memory Trade-off* : q-digest is an adaptive query framework in which users can decide for themselves the appropriate message size and error trade-offs. The error conscious user can set a high maximum message size and achieve good accuracy. A resource conscious user can specify the maximum message size he/she is willing to tolerate, and the q-digest will automatically adapt to stay within this bound and provide the best possible error guarantees. The usefulness of this mode of operation is further extended by the *confidence factor* which is a part of q-digest.

2. *Confidence Factor* : The theoretical worst case error bound applies to only very specific data sets which are unlikely to arise in practice. In any actual query, the error is much smaller and the q-digest structure contains within itself a measure of the maximum error accumulated. So *any* answer provided by q-digest comes with a strict bound of error.

3. *Multiple Queries* : Once a q-digest query has been completed the q-digest at the base station contains a host of interesting information. We can extract information on quantiles, data distribution and consensus values from this structure without further querying the sensor nodes.

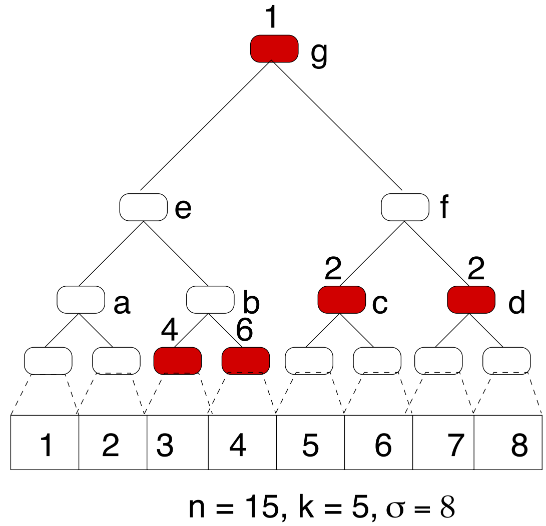


**Figure 1: q-digest: Complete binary tree $T$ built over the entire range $[1 \ldots \sigma]$ of data values. The bottom most level represents single values. The the dark nodes are included in the q-digest $Q$, and number next to them represent their counts.**

The core idea behind q-digest is that it adapts to the data distribution and automatically groups values into variable sized *buckets* of almost equal weights. Since q-digest is aimed at summarizing the data distribution and to support quantile computation, it is useful to compare it with traditional database approaches such as histograms. The critical difference between q-digest and a traditional histogram is that q-digest can have overlapping buckets, while traditional histogram buckets are disjoint. q-digest is also better suited towards sensor network queries. For example, a simple equi-width histogram technique is not suitable for determining quantiles, because the weight of a bucket can be arbitrarily large resulting in unbounded errors. For bounding errors in quantile queries, the more appropriate approach would be to use an equi-depth histogram [20]. This technique, however, requires that the data be stored in sorted order in a single location, which is not practicable in a sensor network setting. The overlapping buckets gives q-digest another advantage over equi-depth histogram, in being able to answer consensus queries (frequent values).

The plan for the rest of this section is as follows. First in section 3.1 we discuss the properties of q-digest and then how one builds it in a single sensor (section 3.2). In section 3.3, we show how q-digests from different sensors are merged together. In section 3.4 we prove the memory and error bounds on q-digest. Finally, in Section 3.5, we show how q-digest can be represented in a compact fashion.

## 3.1 Properties of q-digest

A q-digest consists of a set of buckets of different sizes and their associated counts. Every sensor has a separate q-digest which reflects the summary of data available to it. The set of possible different buckets are chosen from a binary partition of the value space $1, .., \sigma$ as shown in Fig. 1. The depth of the tree $T$ is $\log \sigma$. Each node $v \in T$ can be considered a bucket, and has a range

$[v.min, v.max]$ which defines the position and width of the bucket. For example, root has a range $[1, \sigma]$, and its two children have ranges $[1, \sigma/2]$ and $[\sigma/2 + 1, \sigma]$. The nodes at the bottom-most level have buckets of width 1 (single values). Every bucket or node $v$ has a counter ($count(v)$) associated with it.

In any particular sensor, the q-digest is a subset of these possible buckets with their associated counts. From now on, we refer to a q-digest as $Q$ and the *conceptual* complete tree as $T$. The q-digest encodes information about the distribution of sensor values. For example, the number of values which lie between 1 and $\sigma/2$, is the total count of all nodes in the subtree rooted at the $[1, \sigma/2]$ node. In Fig. 1, the node $f$ corresponds to the range $[5 \ldots 8]$ and the total number of values in this range is $2 + 2 = 4$. For the root node $g$ (range $[1 \ldots 8]$), the total number of values is $1+2+2+4+6 = 15$.

The size of the q-digest is determined by a compression parameter $k$. The exact dependence of $k$ on memory required will be spelled out in Section 3.4. Given the compression parameter $k$, a node $v$ is in q-digest if and only if it satisfies the following *digest property*:

$$count(v) \leq \lfloor n/k \rfloor, \quad (1)$$
$$count(v) + count(v_p) + count(v_s) > \lfloor n/k \rfloor. \quad (2)$$

where $v_p$ is the parent and $v_s$ is the sibling of $v$.

The only exception to this property are the root and leaf nodes. If a leaf's frequency is larger than $\lfloor n/k \rfloor$ then too it belongs to the q-digest. And since there are no parent and sibling for root, its can violate property 2 and still belong to the q-digest.

The first constraint (1) asserts that unless it is a leaf node, no node should have a high count. This property will be used later to prove error bounds on q-digest. The second constraint (2) says that we should not have a node and its children with low counts. The intuition behind this property is that if two adjacent buckets which are siblings have low counts, then we do not want to include two separate counters for them. We merge the children into its parent and thus achieve a degree of compression. This will be described in detail in the next section. Looking at Fig. 1 ($n = 15, k = 5$) we can check that indeed all nodes satisfy these two properties.

## 3.2 Building a q-digest

Consider a particular sensor $s$ that has at its disposal $n$ data values. Each data value is an integer in the range $[1, \sigma]$. An exact representation of the data will consist of the frequencies $\{f_1, f_2, \ldots, f_\sigma\}$, where $f_i$ is the frequency with which the data value $i$ is observed, and $\sum_i f_i = n$. In the worst case, the storage required to store this data will be $\mathcal{O}(n)$ or $\mathcal{O}(\sigma)$, whichever is smaller. Since transmitting this data via radio will be very expensive in a sensor network, we would like to construct a compact representation of this data using q-digest. For the ease of presentation, we shall now describe the process of creation of a q-digest as if all the sensor data is available at $s$. In a real sensor network all these values will be distributed across different sensors. We will later discuss how q-digests are constructed in a distributed fashion on multiple sensors.

To construct the q-digest we will hierarchically merge and reduce the number of buckets. We go through all nodes bottom up and check if any node violates the digest property. Since we are going bottom up, the only constraint that can be violated is Property 2, i.e. nodes whose parent and sibling add up to a small count. For later notational convenience we define a relation $\Delta_v$ on the node $v$ as follows:

$$\Delta_v \equiv count(v) + count(v_l) + count(v_r)$$

where, $v_l$ and $v_r$ are the left and right child of $v$. So, if any node $v$ whose child violate Property 2, its children are merged with it by setting its count to $\Delta_v$ and deleting its children. The algorithm to execute this hierarchical merge is described as COMPRESS (Algorithm 1). It takes the uncompressed q-digest $Q$, the number of readings $n$ and compression parameter $k$ as input. The next example will make it clear how the compression is done.

**Algorithm 1** COMPRESS($Q, n, k$)

$\ell = \log \sigma - 1$;
**while** $l > 0$ **do**
  **for all** $v$ *in level* $\ell$ **do**
    **if** $count(v) + count(v_s) + count(v_p) < \lfloor \frac{n}{k} \rfloor$ **then**
      $count(v_p) += count(v) + count(v_s)$;
      delete $v$ and $v_s$ from $Q$;
    **end if**
  **end for**
  $\ell \leftarrow \ell - 1$;
**end while**

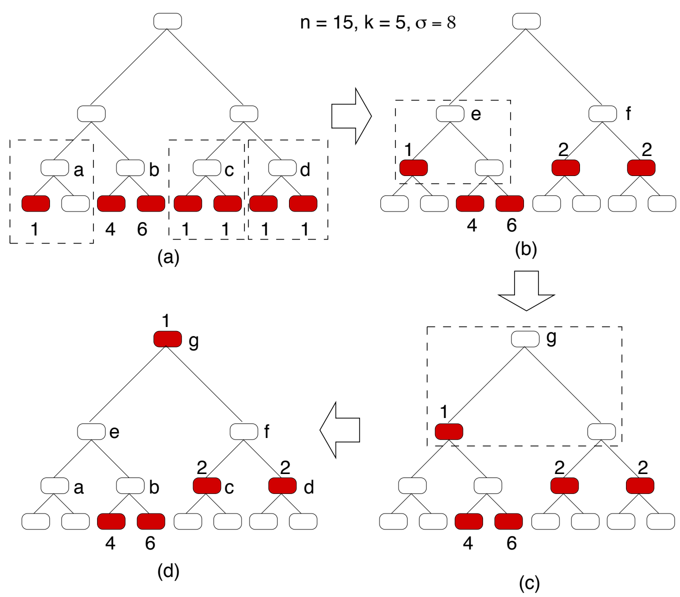


**Figure 2: Building the q-digest. The leaf nodes represent values $[1 \ldots 8]$ from left to right. Dark nodes in (d) are included in q-digest.**

EXAMPLE 1. *Consider a set of $n = 15$ values in the range $[1, 8]$ as shown in Fig. 2(a). The leaf nodes from left to right represent the values $1, 2, \ldots, 8$ and the numbers next to the nodes represent the count. The number of buckets required to store this information exactly is 7 (one bucket per non-zero node). Let us assume a compression factor $k = 5$, $\lfloor n/k \rfloor = 3$. In Fig. 2(a), children of $a, c, d$ violate digest property (2). So we compress each of these nodes by combining their children with them. Thus we arrive at the situation in Fig. 2(b). At this point node $e$ still violates the digest property. So we compress node $e$ and arrive at Fig. 2(c). Node $g$ still violates the digest property and so we compress $g$ and arrive at our final q-digest shown in Fig. 2(d). Only 5 nodes are required to store it.* □

We note some aspects of the q-digest now. Consider node $d$ which represents the range $[7, 8]$ in Fig. 2. The only information that we can recover from the q-digest is that there were two values which were present in the original value distribution in the range

[7, 8]; the original information that there was a value 7 and a value 8 has been lost. On the other hand the information on the ranges 3 and 4 have been preserved perfectly. The q-digest can tell us that there were exactly 4 occurrences of the value 3 and 6 occurrences of value 4. This emphasizes a key feature of q-digest: detailed information concerning data values which occur frequently are preserved in the digest, while less frequently occurring values are lumped into larger buckets resulting in information loss.

## 3.3 Merging q-digests

So far we have shown how the q-digest is built if all the data is available on a single sensor. But in a true sensor network setting we need to be able to build the q-digest in a distributed fashion. For example if two sensors $s_1$ and $s_2$ send their q-digests to their parent sensor (parent in the routing tree), the parent sensor needs to merge these two q-digests to construct a new q-digest and also add its own value to the q-digest. A single value can be considered a trivial q-digest with one leaf node. Since merging multiple q-digests is no harder than merging two digests, we shall now show how two q-digests can be merged.

**Algorithm 2** MERGE($Q_1(n_1, k), Q_2(n_2, k)$)

1: $Q \leftarrow Q_1 \cup Q_2$;
2: COMPRESS($Q, n_1 + n_2, k$);

The idea is to take the union of the two q-digest and add the counts of buckets with the same range ($[min, max]$). Then, we *compress* the resulting q-digest. The formal MERGE algorithm is described in Algorithm 2. The following example shows the merger of two q-digests.

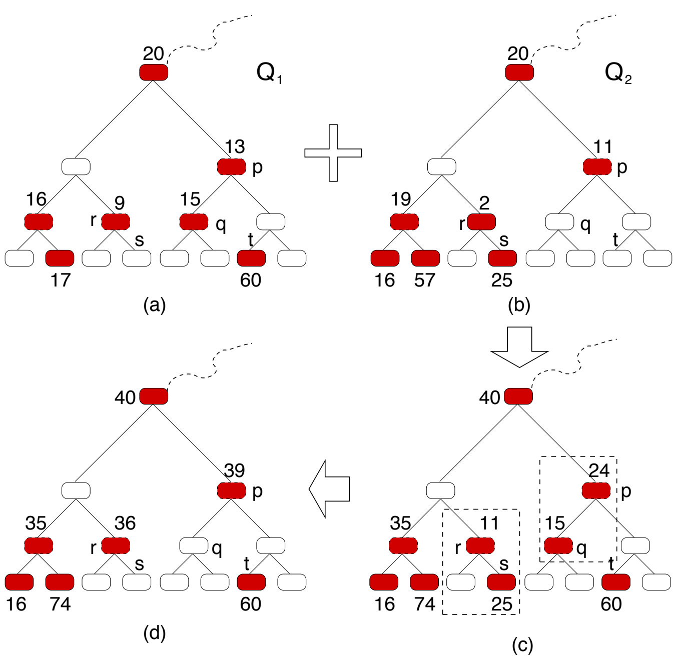


**Figure 3: Merging two q-digest $Q_1$ and $Q_2$, shown in (a) and (b). (c) shows the union of the two q-digests. (d) is the final q-digest after compression.**

EXAMPLE 2. *Figure 3 shows the steps of merging two q-digests $Q_1$ and $Q_2$. For this example, $n_1 = n_2 = 200, k = 10$ and $\sigma = 64$. The tree on the left (3(a)) shows a portion of $Q_1$, and tree in 3(b) shows the corresponding portion of $Q_2$. For the sake of clarity, we are only showing a small subset (range $[1 \ldots 8]$) of the complete trees. The dark nodes are the nodes included in the q-digest, whereas the light ones are just for visualization. For the final q-digest, $n = n_1 + n_2 = 400$ and $\lfloor \frac{n}{k} \rfloor = 40$.*

*The first step is to take the union of the two q-digests. This is shown in Figure 3(c). Notice the nodes in 3(a) and 3(b): after union, their counts have been added in 3(c). After this step, the q-digest could have some nodes which violate the digest property. In 3(c), nodes $r$ and $p$ violate this property ($\Delta_r = 36 < 40, \Delta_p = 39 < 40$). (Notice that no node can violate Property (1)). Hence, $r$ and $p$ are merged with their respective children (shown by the dashed rectangle). Figure 3(d) shows the final q-digest.* □

## 3.4 Space Complexity and Error Bound

In this section we evaluate the space-accuracy trade-off inherent in q-digest. q-digest is a small subset of the complete tree which contains only the nodes with significant counts. This feature of the q-digest provides the following theoretical guarantee on the size of $Q$.

LEMMA 1. *A q-digest ($Q$) constructed with compression parameter $k$ has a size at most $3k$.*

PROOF. Since nodes in $Q$ satisfy digest property (2), we have the following inequality:

$$\sum_{v \in Q} (count(v) + count(v_p) + count(v_s)) > |Q| \cdot \frac{n}{k}$$

where $|Q|$ is the size of the q-digest $Q$.

Now, in the summation on the left hand side, the count of any node contributes at most once as each parent, sibling and itself. Hence,

$$\sum_{v \in Q} (count(v) + count(v_p) + count(v_s))$$
$$\leq 3 \sum_{v \in Q} count(v) = 3n.$$

Hence, we get

$$|Q| \cdot \frac{n}{k} < 3n.$$

So the total size of the q-digest is $3k$. □

Any time a q-digest is created, information is lost. As is evident from Example 1, a node with small count will be merged into its parent, and thus its count can recursively "float" to its ancestor at any level. For example, the count of leftmost leaf in Fig. 2(a) ends up in the root of the tree in Fig. 2(d). Similarly merging two digests can also lead to information loss. For example consider the two nodes marked as $t$ in Fig 3 (a) and (b). In the tree $Q_2$, the information for node $t$ has been merged into $p$. So in the final q-digest shown in Fig. 3(d), the node $t$, undercounts the occurrence of that value. Some of that count is hidden in node $p$ and some even in the root node. In the worst case, the count of any node can deviate from its actual value by the sum of the counts of its ancestors. We will use this reasoning to prove the error bounds on quantile queries. This bounds the maximum error in our scheme as shown in the next lemma.

LEMMA 2. *In a q-digest ($Q$) created using the compression factor $k$, the maximum error in count of any node is $\frac{\log \sigma}{k} \cdot n$.*

PROOF. Any value which should be counted in $v$ can be present in one of the ancestors of $v$ in $T$. So the maximum error in $v$:

$$\begin{aligned} error(v) &\leq \sum_{x \in ancestor(v)} count(x) \\ &\leq \sum_{x \in ancestor(v)} \frac{n}{k} \quad \text{(Property 1)} \\ &\leq \log\sigma \cdot \frac{n}{k} \quad \text{(height of tree is } \log\sigma\text{)} \end{aligned}$$

□

Thus the relative error $error(v)/n$ in any node's count is $\log(\sigma)/k$.

We now prove that after merging two q-digests, we can still maintain the same error bounds.

LEMMA 3. *Given $p$ q-digests $Q_1, Q_2, ...Q_p$, built on $n_1, n_2, ...n_p$ values, each with maximum relative error of $\frac{\log\sigma}{k}$, the algorithm MERGE combines them into a q-digest for $\sum n_i$ values, with the same relative error.*

PROOF. Merging is a two step process: union step and compression step. From Lemma 2, the compression algorithm ensures that the error is less than $\frac{\log\sigma}{k}$, given that the tree before compression had the same error bounds. So, we just need to prove that after the union step error is not more than $\frac{\log\sigma}{k}$.

After union, any node $v$ of $Q$ is just the union of corresponding nodes $v_1, v_2, ...v_p$ in q-digests, the error in $v$ can be at most the sum of errors in counts of $v_1, v_2, ...v_p$:

$$\begin{aligned} error(v) &\leq \sum_i error(v_i) \leq \sum \frac{\log\sigma}{k} n_i \\ &= \frac{\log\sigma}{k} \sum n_i = \frac{\log\sigma}{k} n \end{aligned}$$

Hence, the relative error after union step is bounded by $\frac{\log\sigma}{k}$. □

Now, we prove the error bounds on quantile queries. But before we proceed, we would like to provide a definition of quantile query and explain how quantiles can be computed using q-digest.

In quantile query, the aim is the following: given a fraction $q \in (0, 1)$, find the value whose rank in sorted sequence of the $n$ values is $qn$. `MEDIAN` is a special case of quantile query, with $q = 0.5$. The relative error $\varepsilon$ in the query is defined as follows: if the returned value has true rank $r$, then the error $\varepsilon$ is

$$\varepsilon \equiv \frac{|r - qn|}{n}.$$

We now describe how quantile queries can be answered using q-digest. The intuition is as follow: Suppose we did a *post-order* traversal on $Q$, and summed the counts of all the nodes visited before a node $v$. This sum $c$, is a lower bound on the number of values which are surely less than $v.max$. We report the value $v.max$ as $q$th quantile, for which $c$ becomes greater than (or equal to) $qn$. This sum would be the exact quantile, if all the non-leaf nodes whose range contains of $v.max$ (ancestors of the leaf node containing the single value $v.max$) had a count of zero. But if they are non zero, some of the values counted in them can be greater than $v.max$, and we have no way to determine that. For example, if we did a `MEDIAN` query on Fig. 2(d), we will report the value $4$ as the answer, but do not know whether the values in $g$ were less than or more than $4$.

Using Lemma 3, we know that this error is bounded by $(\frac{\log\sigma}{k} \cdot n)$. Hence we can find the number of values less than $v.max$ with bounded error. The algorithm to do this query efficiently on a q-digest is described in Section 4.

Now we are ready to state the main result of this paper.

THEOREM 1. *Given memory $m$ to build a q-digest, it is possible to answer any quantile query with error $\varepsilon$ such that*

$$\varepsilon \leq \frac{3\log\sigma}{m}$$

PROOF. Choose the compression factor $k$ to be $m/3$. Lemma 1 says that the memory required is $m$. The error in quantile query:

$$\varepsilon \leq \frac{\log\sigma}{k} = \frac{3\log\sigma}{m}$$

□

## 3.5 Representation of a q-digest

After computing the q-digest structure, each sensor has to pack it, and transmit it to its parent. The main limitation of sensor networks is their limited bandwidth. To represent a q-digest tree in a compact fashion we number the nodes from 1 to $2\sigma - 1$ in a level by level order, i.e. root is numbered 1 and its two children are numbered 2 and 3 etc. Now to transmit the q-digest we send a set of tuple of the following form $\langle nodeid(v), count(v)\rangle$ which requires a total of $(\log(2\sigma) + \log n)$ bits for each tuple. For example, the q-digest in Fig. 1 is represented as: $\{\langle 1,1\rangle, \langle 6,2\rangle, \langle 7,2\rangle, \langle 10,4\rangle, \langle 11,6\rangle\}$

# 4. QUERIES ON Q-DIGEST

In this section, we describe the possible queries that can be supported using q-digest. We assume that the size of q-digests is $m$, which means that the relative error $\varepsilon$ is less than $\frac{3\log\sigma}{m}$.

## 4.1 Quantile Query

The quantile query is: Given a fraction $q \in (0, 1)$, find the value whose rank in sorted sequence of the $n$ values is $qn$.

To find the $q$th quantile from q-digest, we sort the nodes of q-digest in increasing right endpoints ($max$ values); breaking ties by putting smaller ranges first. This list ($L$) gives us the *post-order* traversal of list nodes in q-digest. Now we scan $L$ (from the beginning) and add the counts of nodes as they are seen. For some node $v$, this sum becomes more than $qn$, we report $v.max$ as our estimate of the quantile.

Notice that there are at least $qn$ readings with value less than $v.max$, hence rank of $v$ is at least $qn$. The source of error are readings with value less than $v.max$, present in ancestors of $v$. These will not be counted in quantile algorithm, since $v$ comes before its ancestors in $L$. This error is bounded by $\varepsilon n$ (Theorem 1). So, the rank of value reported by our algorithm is between $qn$ and $(q+\varepsilon)n$. Thus the error in our estimate is always positive, i.e., we always give a value which has a rank greater than (or equal to) the actual quantile.

For example, if we perform a `MEDIAN` query on q-digest $Q$ $\{\langle 1,1\rangle, \langle 6,2\rangle, \langle 7,2\rangle, \langle 10,4\rangle, \langle 11,6\rangle\}$, shown in Fig. 2(d), the sorted list $L$ will be $\{\langle 10,4\rangle, \langle 11,6\rangle, \langle 6,2\rangle, \langle 7,2\rangle, \langle 1,1\rangle\}$. The count at node $\langle 11,6\rangle$ will be more than $0.5n$ (8), and we will report the value $4$ as the estimated median. The error is bounded by the count of node $g$.

## 4.2 Other Queries

Once the q-digest is computed, it can be used to provide approximate answers to a variety of queries.

- **Inverse Quantile**: Given a value $x$, determine its rank in the sorted sequence of the input values.

  In this case, we again make the same sorted list ($L$), and traverse it from beginning to end. We report the sum of counts of buckets $v$ for which $x > v.max$ as the rank of $x$. The reported rank is between $rank(x)$ and $rank(x)+\varepsilon n, rank(x)$ being the actual rank of $x$.

- **Range Query**: Find the number of values in the given range $[low, high]$.

  We simply perform two inverse quantile queries to find the ranks of $low$ and $high$, and take their difference. The maximum error for this query is $2\varepsilon n$

- **Consensus Query**: Given a fraction $s \in (0, 1)$, find all the values which are reported by more than $sn$ sensors. This can be thought of finding a value on which more than certain fraction of sensor *agreed*. These values are called *Frequent items*.

  We report all the unit-width buckets whose count are more than $(s - \varepsilon)n$. Since the count of leaf bucket has an error of at-most $\varepsilon n$ (Lemma 2), we will find all the values with frequency more than $sn$. There will be a small number of false positives; some values with count between $(s - \varepsilon)n$ and $sn$ may also be reported as frequent.

## 4.3 The Confidence Factor

In Theorem 1 we proved that the worst case error for a q-digest of size $m$ is $\frac{3 \log \sigma}{m}$. But this worst case occurs for a very pathological input set, which is unlikely in practice. Choosing the message size according to these estimates will lead to useless transmission of large messages, when a smaller one could have ensured the same required error bounds. So if the q-digest is computed by setting $m$ to a value for which it is *expected* to deliver the required error guarantees, we still need a way to certify that those guarantees are met. For this, we provide a way to calculate the error in each particular q-digest structure. We call this the *confidence factor*.

If we define the *weight* of a path as the sum of the counts of the nodes in the path, the weight of the path from root to any node is equal to the sum of its ancestors. So the maximum error is present in the path of q-digest with the maximum weight. We define the confidence factor $\theta$ as: $\theta =$ (maximum weight of any path from root to leaf in $Q$) / $n$.

This ensures that the error in *any* quantile query is bounded by $\theta$. Hence, now we can find out the maximum error in any q-digest and discard the query if it does not satisfy the required precision. In experiments, for example, we work with $\sigma = 2^{16}$ and $m = 100$, the theoretical maximum error is $\frac{3 \log \sigma}{m} \approx 48\%$, but we get a confidence factor of $\approx 9\%$ for the q-digest at the base station. This leads to huge savings in terms of transmission cost. Notice that the actual error in query can still be much smaller than $\theta$ (in experiments the actual error in the median was close to $2\%$).

# 5. EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

We simulated our aggregation algorithm in C++. The simulator takes the network topology (routing tree) and readings of sensors as the input. The base station initiates q-digest computation by sending a query to all its children, which forwards this query to their children, and so on. The leaf sensors send their value as q-digest to their parent. Each sensor then aggregates q-digests received from its children with its own reading, and then sends the aggregate to its parent. The quantile and range queries are performed on the q-digest received at the base station.

The topology for the network was generated as follows. We assume that the sensors have a fixed radio range and are placed in a square area randomly. If two sensors are within range of each other, they are considered neighbors. This generates a network connectivity graph. The routing tree required for our simulation is simply a breadth first search tree over this graph with an arbitrary node chosen as the root or the base station. In Fig 4, we show a typical network routing tree. When we vary the number of sensors, we vary the size of the area over which they are distributed so as to keep the density of sensors constant. As an example, we used a 1000×1000 area for 1000 sensors with equal radio ranges. For 4000 sensors, the terrain dimensions were enlarged to 2000×2000 keeping radio range constant.

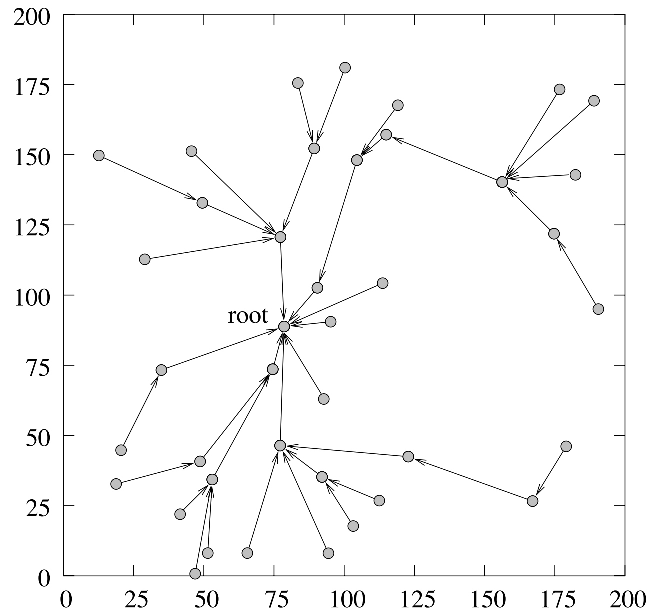


**Figure 4: A typical network routing tree for 40 nodes placed in a 200×200 area.**

We ran our aggregation algorithm for "random" and "correlated" sensor values. For the random case, each sensor value is taken to be a 16 bit random number. In a real network, the values at sensors are not random, but are correlated with their geographic location. To simulate such correlation we adapted geographic elevation data available from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) [22] which is shown in Fig 5. The sensors are assumed to be scattered over the terrain and the elevation of the terrain at the sensor location is assigned as the sensor value. The terrain size was scaled to fit in with our simulated terrain size and the elevation data was scaled to fit in 16 bits. All performance data we present is averaged over 5 different topologies.

We compare the performance of our algorithm with a simple unaggregated data summarization scheme which we call *list*. In this scheme, the summary is a list of distinct sensor values and a count for each value. At each node, this list contains all the distinct sensor values that occur in the subtree rooted at the node. In other words the list structure is a histogram with bucket width 1. There is no information loss and we can answer quantile or histogram queries exactly. As the message progresses towards the base station, more and more distinct values begin to occur and the size of the message grows.

## 5.1 Range Queries and Histogram

As a first demonstration of our algorithm we build a histogram of the correlated input data using range queries for 8000 nodes. We divided the data values into 32 equi-width buckets and queried

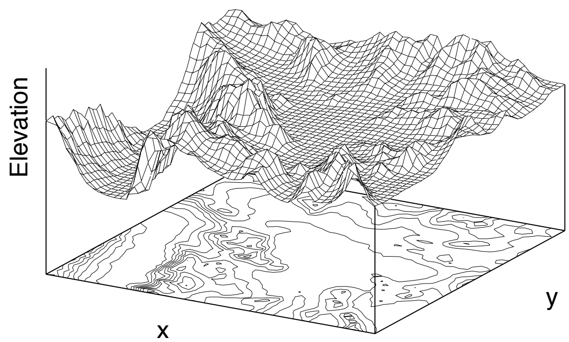


**Figure 5: Three dimensional elevation data for Death Valley which is used to model correlated data for our simulation. The bottom of the plot shows the contour lines for the terrain.**

| Data Type | Msg Size (bytes) | $\theta$ | Actual Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| Random | 160 | 13% | 6.1% |
| Correlated | 160 | 24% | 5.0% |
| Random | 400 | 6.6% | 2.6% |
| Correlated | 400 | 7.3% | 1.9% |

**Table 1: Maximum possible error and actual error in median query**

both q-digest and *list* summaries to find the number of values in each bucket. The resulting histogram is shown in Fig 6. On Fig 5 there are two relatively flat areas which are clearly identifiable in the contour plot: the empty area near the bottom left hand corner and the area near the center. Sensors on these areas will contribute a lot of values which are close to each other. These features lead to two peaks (at 0 and 22K) in the histogram which are very well captured by our aggregation scheme.

## 5.2 Accuracy and Message Size

In an 8000 sensor network, we measured the accuracy of our algorithm in evaluating the median for different message sizes. The error in this experiment is defined as the ratio of rank error in the median estimated from q-digest and number of values ($\varepsilon = \frac{(|r-n/2|)}{n}$). The results are shown in Fig 7. As expected, the graph shows that the error declines very rapidly with growing message size and with a message size of 160 bytes, we already are down to $5\%$ error. There is no significant difference in error for random or correlated data.

We also calculated the confidence factors ($\theta$) for median calculation with varying message sizes. This data is shown in Table 1. It is clear that the theoretically estimated accuracy is pessimistic compared to the actual accuracy achieved.

Now we turn to a comparison of the message sizes required by q-digest and those required by *list*. From Fig 7 it is clear that a message size of 400 is sufficient to achieve accuracy of $2\%$. Compared to this, how much do we need to pay for exact answers? The comparison is shown in Fig 8 which shows maximum message size for q-digest and *list* for different numbers of sensors. Regardless of the

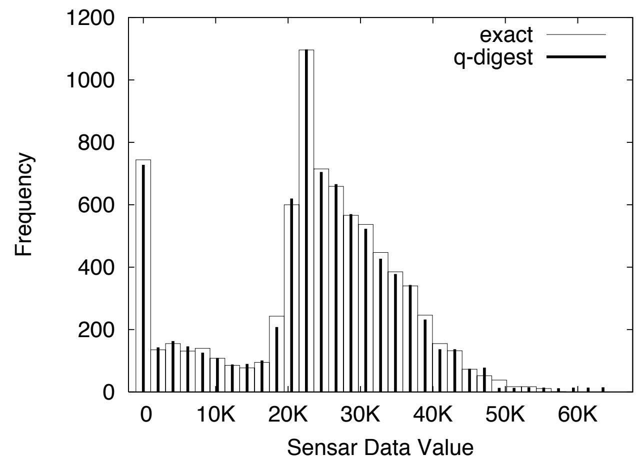


**Figure 6: Exact and approximate histogram of input data shown in Fig 5. The open boxes represent the exact histogram while the solid thin bars represent the approximate histogram obtained from q-digest.**

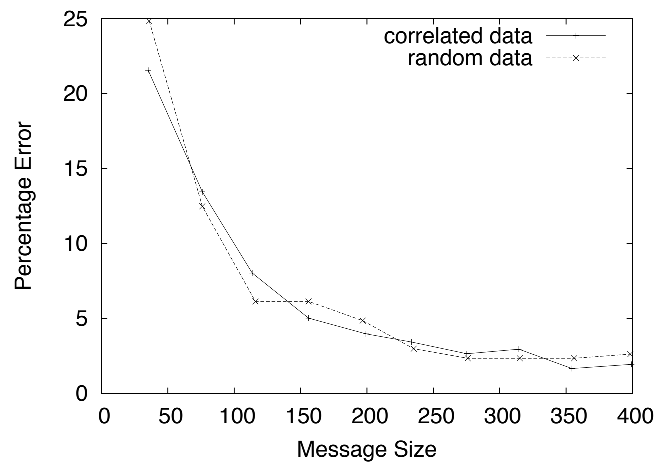


**Figure 7: Measured percentage error in median vs message size (in bytes) for an 8000 node network.**

correlation in data values or $n$ (the number of sensors), to achieve $2\%$ accuracy our maximum message size needs to be no bigger than 400. For random data, the size for *list* increases steadily with $n$. Since the sensor values for the random case can be any integer between 0 and $65535$, the number of distinct sensor values is roughly proportional to the number of different sensors. For the correlated case, the number of distinct values in the input is only about $1500$. So the maximum message size for *list* plateaus with increasing number of sensors.

A more detailed view of the distribution of message sizes is shown in Fig 9. Given a message size $m$, we ask the question : what fraction of total nodes transmitted messages of size larger than $m$? This quantity is plotted in the vertical axis. We compare this distribution for $list$ and q-digest (size 400 bytes) for random input values. For message sizes less than 400 bytes, the *list* and q-digest the distribution is identical. For q-digest there are no nodes which transmit message of size larger than 400 bytes. In comparison, about 5% (400 nodes) of nodes for the *list* scheme do transmit

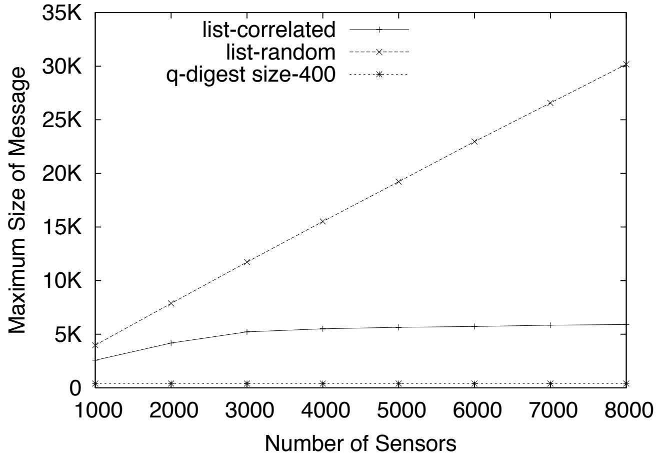


**Figure 8: Maximum message sizes for different numbers of sensors for naive unaggregated algorithm and our aggregation algorithm. We fixed message size at 400 bytes which gives about a 2% error (see Fig 7).**

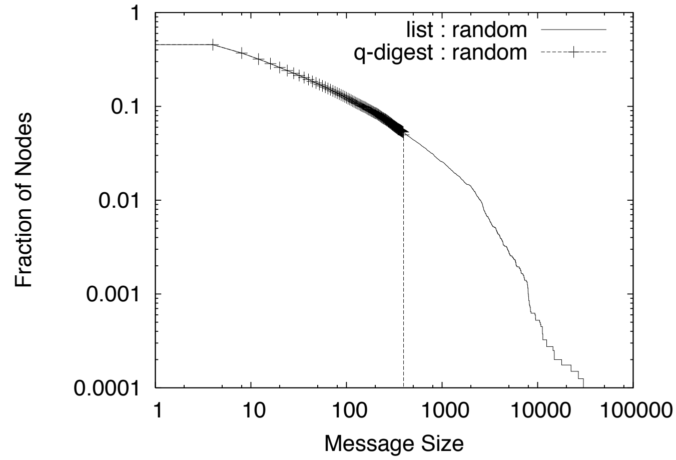


**Figure 9: Cumulative Distribution of number of nodes as a function of message size. On the horizontal axis we have message size $m$, while on the vertical axis we have number of nodes which transmitted messages of size larger than $m$. Total number of nodes is 8000.**

messages larger than this. 5% might look like a small number, but we immediately realize that these nodes actually bear an unusually heavy load. 1% of nodes transmit messages of size bigger than 3K and some nodes transmit messages of size up to 30K! These nodes represent nodes closer to the base station. In any routing tree most of the nodes are near the leaf levels and such nodes are very lightly loaded compared to nodes near to the base station. Q-digest does a much better job at distributing load by requiring no node to transmit more than 400 bytes.

## 5.3 Total Data Transmission

In Fig 10 we show the total amount of data transferred for q-digest and *list*. As expected, since the number of distinct values is less for correlated scenario, the amount of data transferred is lower for correlated data. For a network size of 1000, our scheme outperforms the *list* algorithm by a factor of 2, while for network size of 8000, this factor increases to about 4. This shows that our scheme is highly scalable, and has significant performance benefits in the case of larger networks.

## 5.4 Residual Power

Data transmission is very closely tied up with power consumption in sensor networks. There are two common metrics for measuring power consumption which we shall consider in turn.

- *Total power consumption* : This is the total power spent by all nodes in the network and is roughly proportional to total amount of data transmitted in the network (Fig 10). In reality, power consumption increases super-linearly with total data transmitted. This is because with increasing number of data packets, there is more contention for the wireless medium and a lot of power can be spent in packet collisions.

- *Lifetime* : A more appropriate power consumption metric is the lifetime of the network. This is the time at which network partition occurs because of nodes running out of power. A slightly different definition of lifetime can be taken as the time required for the first node to run out of power. For a network which is geared towards data aggregation, the nodes near the base station shoulder the bulk of data transmission and hence runs out of power fastest. Thus in general, lifetime is a more useful indicator of the usable life of the network than total power consumption.

With q-digest, even nodes close to the base station transmit very small amounts of data and the transmission burden is distributed much more equitably. So we can expect the usable life time of the network to be vastly extended with our data aggregation scheme compared to the *list* scheme. We experimentally demonstrate this by considering the *residual power* of sensor nodes after a query. Let us assume that all nodes in the network start with the same amount of battery power. After a query has been processed, different nodes will have different amounts of power left depending on how much data each node transmitted. This power left is known as residual power. Residual power is a measure of the load distribution in the network.

We simulated the effect of a single query on an 8000 node network where all nodes started out with equal power of 40000 units. We assumed that for every byte transmitted, one unit of power is depleted. The results are shown in Fig 11. On the horizontal axis we plot residual power fraction $P$ which is defined as

$$P = \frac{\text{Residual Power}}{\text{Initial Power}}$$

On the vertical axis we plot the number of nodes which have residual power fraction less than $P$. From Fig 11 we see that $list$ does a very bad job of distributing load. More than one node (0.02% of 8000) have residual power fraction less than $1/2$, i.e. one query drained half the battery power available for these nodes! At this consumption rate, after two queries using *list*, there will be at least one exhausted node. On the other hand q-digest performs well. The maximum message size for q-digest was set to 400; hence no node spent any more than 400 units of power. Thus all nodes had residual power fraction better than 99%. In the worst case, q-digest will be able to perform 100 queries before any node runs out of power.

# 6. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

We have presented q-digest : a distributed data summarization technique for approximate queries using limited memory. It ac-

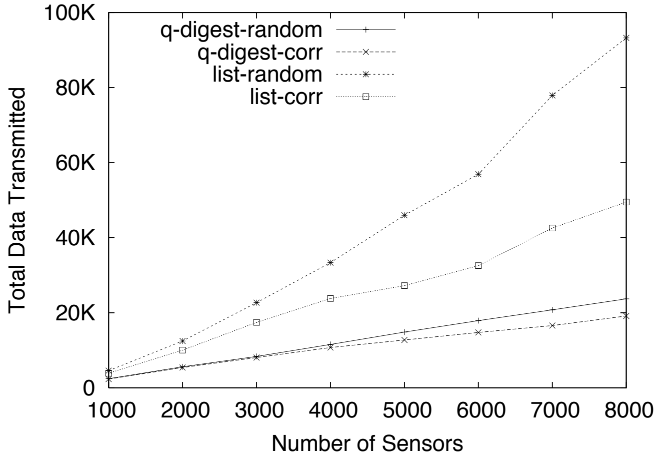


**Figure 10: Total data transmitted plotted as a function of total number of sensors for both random and correlated input. The message size for the aggregated scheme was set at 160 bytes.**

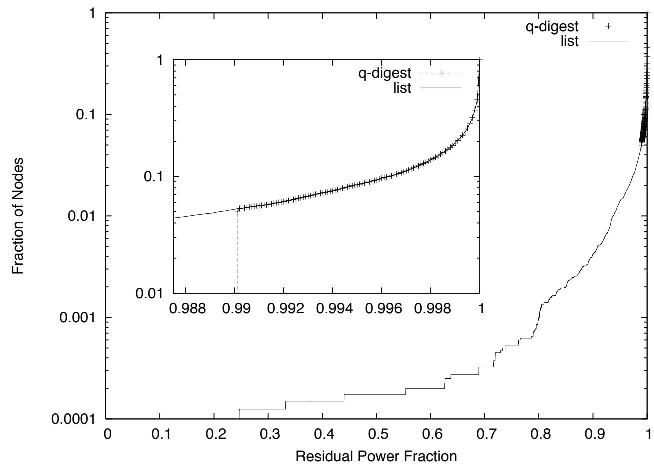


**Figure 11: Cumulative distribution of nodes with residual power fraction. The inset shows a magnified view of the right hand edge of the graph. The total number of nodes is 8000, q-digest message size is 400.**

curately preserves information about high frequency values while compressing information about low frequency ones. As such, it is a good approximation scheme when there are wide variations in frequencies of different values. Our experimental results indicate that orders of magnitude savings in bandwidth and power can be realized by q-digest compared to naive schemes for both random and correlated data. We note that q-digest is easily extensible to multi-dimensional data. For example to handle two dimensional data, we need to extend the binary tree representation of q-digest to a quad tree.

We have shown how a q-digest can be computed in a distributed fashion once a query is made. In a continuous query setting, such a digest will become outdated as sensor values change. It is possible to build a new q-digest by sending in a new query; but a more efficient way would be to send small updates such that the old q-digest can be refreshed with new information.

In the current work, we have not taken into account the effect of lost messages. The effect of lost messages can be mitigated to some extent in a continuous query setting where the digest is continuously updated. In that case the parent can cache the q-digests received from its children and if a q-digest from a child is lost, it can replace that q-digest by the older one.

As presented in this paper, q-digest provides information about the distribution of data values, but not information concerning *where* those values occurred. Since q-digest is easily extensible to multi-dimensional data, we are currently working on a multi-dimensional q-digest where spatial information will be preserved and hence the user would be able to query not only about data values, but the spatial locations of those values as well. We envision that as querying architectures for sensor network become more and more sophisticated, the use of efficient approximate algorithms will become very common.

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