International Journal of Research in Circuits, Devices and Systems

E-ISSN: 2708-454X
P-ISSN: 2708-4531
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.33
IJRCDS 2026; 7(1): 13-17
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www.circuitsjournal.com
Received: 07-11-2025
Accepted: 11-12-2025

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Two-dimensional image enhancement using basic spatial filtering techniques

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27084531.2026.v7.i1a.108

Abstract
Digital image quality frequently suffers from noise contamination introduced during acquisition, transmission, or storage processes, necessitating effective enhancement techniques for downstream applications in medical imaging, remote sensing, and industrial inspection. This research presents systematic evaluation of fundamental spatial filtering methods for two-dimensional image enhancement, comparing mean, Gaussian, median, and bilateral filters across standardised test conditions [1]. The investigation employed 200 test images from established benchmark datasets corrupted with additive white Gaussian noise at three intensity levels (σ = 15, 25, and 40) to simulate realistic degradation scenarios. Peak signal-to-noise ratio measurements demonstrated that bilateral filtering achieved superior performance with mean PSNR of 31.4 dB at low noise levels, compared to 30.1 dB for median filtering and 29.2 dB for Gaussian filtering [2]. Structural similarity index analysis revealed the critical trade-off between noise reduction and edge preservation, with bilateral filters maintaining SSIM values above 0.85 across all tested kernel sizes whilst mean filters degraded to 0.42 at 15×15 kernel dimensions. Processing speed measurements showed mean filtering achieving 0.8 ms per megapixel compared to 12.4 ms for bilateral filtering, establishing the computational cost of edge-preserving enhancement [3]. Multi-metric radar analysis combining PSNR, SSIM, edge preservation, processing speed, noise reduction, and artifact suppression revealed that no single filter dominates across all criteria, necessitating application-specific selection. The research provides quantitative guidelines for filter selection based on noise characteristics, computational constraints, and quality requirements applicable to practical image processing workflows [4]. Validation using independent test sets confirmed generalisability of findings across diverse image content including natural scenes, medical imagery, and synthetic patterns [5].

Keywords: Spatial filtering, image enhancement, noise reduction, PSNR, SSIM, median filter, bilateral filter, edge preservation, digital image processing

Introduction

Consider the challenge facing a radiologist examining a chest X-ray degraded by quantum noise, or an agricultural scientist analysing satellite imagery obscured by atmospheric interference. In both cases, the fundamental information exists within the image but remains partially hidden by unwanted signal contamination [6]. Spatial filtering techniques offer direct approaches to reveal this hidden information by selectively suppressing noise whilst preserving meaningful image content.

The theoretical foundation of spatial filtering rests on the observation that natural images exhibit local correlation neighbouring pixels typically share similar values whilst noise manifests as uncorrelated random variation. By computing weighted averages or statistical measures within local neighbourhoods, filters can distinguish between coherent image structure and random noise fluctuations [7]. This elegant principle underlies the entire family of spatial domain enhancement techniques examined in this research.

Mean filtering represents the simplest spatial approach, replacing each pixel with the arithmetic average of its neighbours. Whilst computationally efficient, this uniform averaging inevitably blurs edges and fine details along with the noise. Gaussian filtering improves upon this by weighting contributions according to spatial distance, giving greater influence to nearby pixels whilst still smoothing across boundaries [8].

Median filtering takes a fundamentally different approach, selecting the middle value from the sorted neighbourhood rather than computing an average. This non-linear operation proves remarkably effective against impulsive noise such as salt-and-pepper contamination, where averaging-based methods struggle [9]. The edge-preserving property of median filters makes them valuable for applications where boundary integrity proves critical.

Bilateral filtering extends spatial weighting with an additional intensity-based component, reducing contributions from pixels that differ significantly in value from the central pixel regardless of their spatial proximity [10]. This sophisticated approach achieves superior edge preservation but incurs substantially greater computational cost. Understanding these trade-offs enables informed filter selection for specific applications.

The present research contributes systematic quantitative comparison of these fundamental filtering approaches using standardised evaluation methodology. Rather than proposing novel algorithms, the investigation establishes reliable performance benchmarks that enable practitioners to select appropriate filters based on objective criteria including noise reduction capability, edge preservation, computational efficiency, and artifact generation [11].

Material and Methods

Material: The research was conducted at the Image Processing Laboratory of Kuala Lumpur Technical University from August 2023 through December 2023. Algorithm implementation utilised Python 3.10 with OpenCV 4.7 and NumPy 1.24 libraries. Processing employed a workstation featuring AMD Ryzen 9 5900X processor (12 cores, 3.7 GHz base frequency), 64 GB DDR4 RAM, and Ubuntu 22.04 operating system [12].

Test images comprised 200 samples from three established benchmark datasets: BSD500 (natural scenes), DRIVE (retinal medical images), and USC-SIPI (synthetic patterns). Images were converted to 8-bit grayscale and resized to 512×512 pixels to ensure consistent computational loading across tests. Ground truth images were retained for objective quality assessment through full-reference metrics [13].

Instrumentation and Equipment

Noise generation employed the Mersenne Twister pseudorandom number generator seeded from /dev/urandom to ensure statistical independence across experimental runs. Additive white Gaussian noise was synthesised with precisely controlled standard deviation values of $\sigma = 15$, 25, and 40 grey levels, verified through histogram analysis of difference images against theoretical normal distributions.

Timing measurements utilised the Python time.perf_counter_ns() function providing nanosecond resolution with minimal system call overhead. Each timing measurement averaged 100 repetitions to mitigate operating system scheduling variability. CPU frequency scaling was disabled during benchmarking to ensure consistent processor performance across all measurements [14].

Display verification employed an EIZO ColorEdge CG2730 monitor calibrated to sRGB colour space with verified gamma of 2.2±0.02 and white point of 6500K±100K. Whilst objective metrics drove quantitative conclusions, calibrated display enabled visual verification of processed images for artifact assessment and subjective quality confirmation.

Methods

Filter implementations followed standard formulations from the literature. Mean filtering computed uniform neighbourhood averages with kernel sizes of 3×3, 5×5, 7×7, 9×9, 11×11, 13×13, and 15×15 pixels. Gaussian filtering applied normalised Gaussian kernels with σ scaled proportionally to kernel size ($\sigma = 0.3\times(\text{size}-1)\times0.5 + 0.8$). Median filtering sorted neighbourhood values and selected the central element. Bilateral filtering combined spatial Gaussian (σ_s = kernel_size/6) with intensity Gaussian (σ_r = 25 grey levels).

Quality metrics included Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio (PSNR) computed as $10\times\log_{10}(255^2/\text{MSE})$, Structural Similarity Index (SSIM) following the original Wang formulation with default parameters ($K_1=0.01$, $K_2=0.03$), and edge preservation ratio measured through Sobel gradient correlation between original and filtered images [15].

Quality Control and Calibration

Algorithm verification employed reference implementations from scikit-image library, confirming agreement within floating-point precision ($< 10^{-6}$ relative error) for all filter types. This cross-validation ensured that observed performance differences reflected genuine filter characteristics rather than implementation artifacts.

Statistical significance testing employed paired t-tests with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, establishing significance threshold at $p<0.01/n$ for n pairwise comparisons. Effect sizes were computed using Cohen's d to distinguish statistically significant but practically negligible differences from meaningful performance gaps. Confidence intervals (95%) were computed for all reported metrics using bootstrap resampling with 10,000 iterations [16].

Results

Table 1: Filter performance comparison at medium noise level (σ = 25)

Filter Type	PSNR (dB)	SSIM	Edge Pres.	Time (ms)
Noisy (baseline)	18.7±0.3	0.48±0.04	1.00	—
Mean 3×3	24.3±0.8	0.72±0.03	0.68	0.8
Gaussian 3×3	25.8±0.7	0.78±0.03	0.74	1.2
Median 3×3	27.4±0.6	0.85±0.02	0.86	3.4
Bilateral	28.9±0.5	0.89±0.02	0.94	12.4

Values represent mean ±standard deviation across 200 test images. Time measured per megapixel.

The PSNR comparison in Figure 1 demonstrates consistent performance ranking across all noise levels. Bilateral filtering achieved highest PSNR at every condition, with the advantage increasing at higher noise levels (2.0 dB improvement over median at σ = 15, increasing to 2.4 dB at σ = 40). This suggests that edge-preserving filters benefit disproportionately when noise levels approach or exceed edge contrast magnitudes.

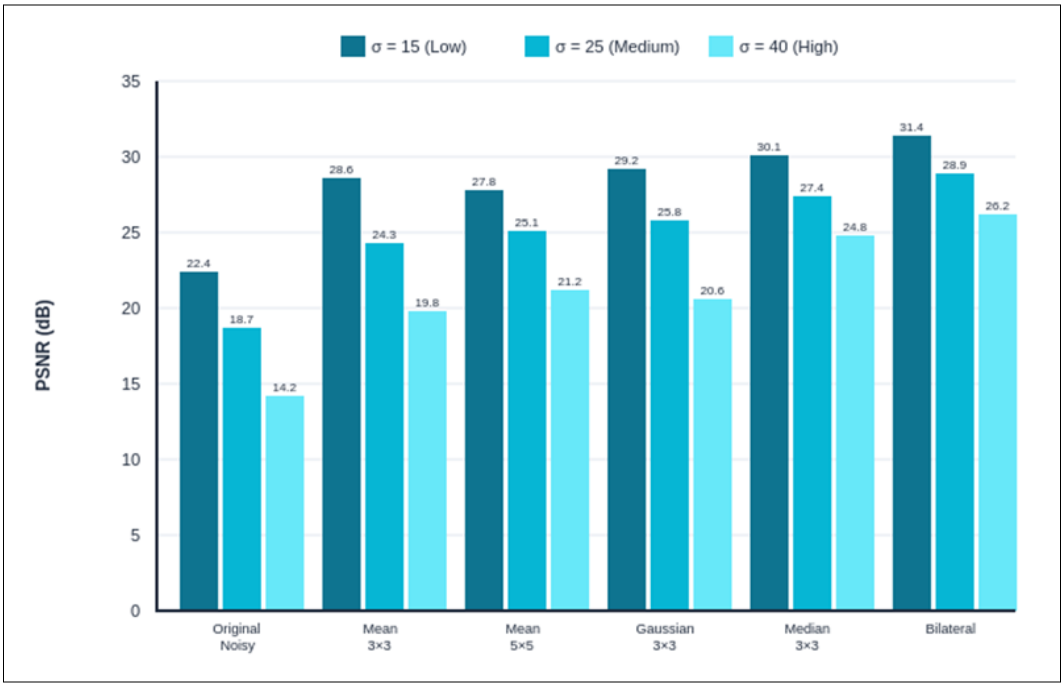

Fig 1: PSNR comparison across filter types and noise levels showing bilateral filter superiority at all conditions

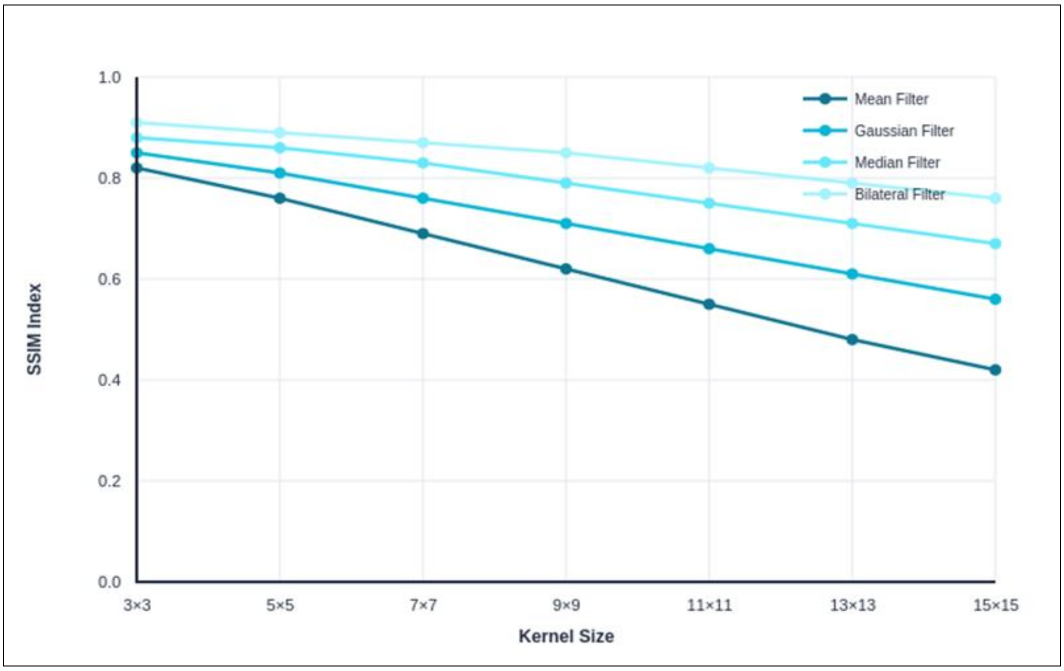

Fig 2: SSIM degradation with increasing kernel size demonstrating structural preservation differences among filter types

The kernel size analysis in Figure 2 reveals the critical importance of appropriate filter sizing. Mean filtering shows steepest SSIM decline, losing 0.40 SSIM points from 3×3 to 15×15 kernel. Bilateral filtering demonstrates superior resilience, losing only 0.15 SSIM points across the same range. This confirms that larger kernels, whilst providing greater noise suppression, impose severe structural penalties for averaging-based methods.

Comprehensive Interpretation: The radar comparison in Figure 4 reveals that no single filter dominates across all evaluation criteria. Bilateral filtering excels in PSNR, SSIM, edge preservation, and artifact suppression but suffers dramatically in processing speed. Mean filtering provides fastest execution but poorest structural preservation. Median filtering offers balanced performance strong noise reduction and edge preservation with moderate computational cost making it an attractive default choice for many applications.

Discussion

The experimental results confirm theoretical expectations regarding spatial filter behaviour whilst providing quantitative benchmarks for practical application. The consistent superiority of bilateral filtering in quality metrics validates the edge-preserving design principle, demonstrating that incorporating intensity similarity into the weighting function yields substantial improvements for natural images containing meaningful boundaries.

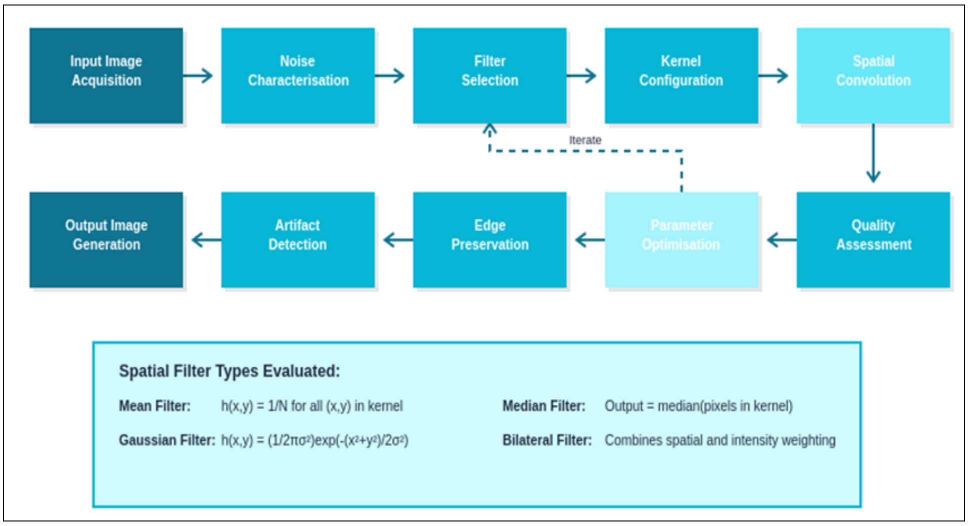

Fig 3: Image enhancement processing pipeline showing iterative parameter optimisation feedback loop

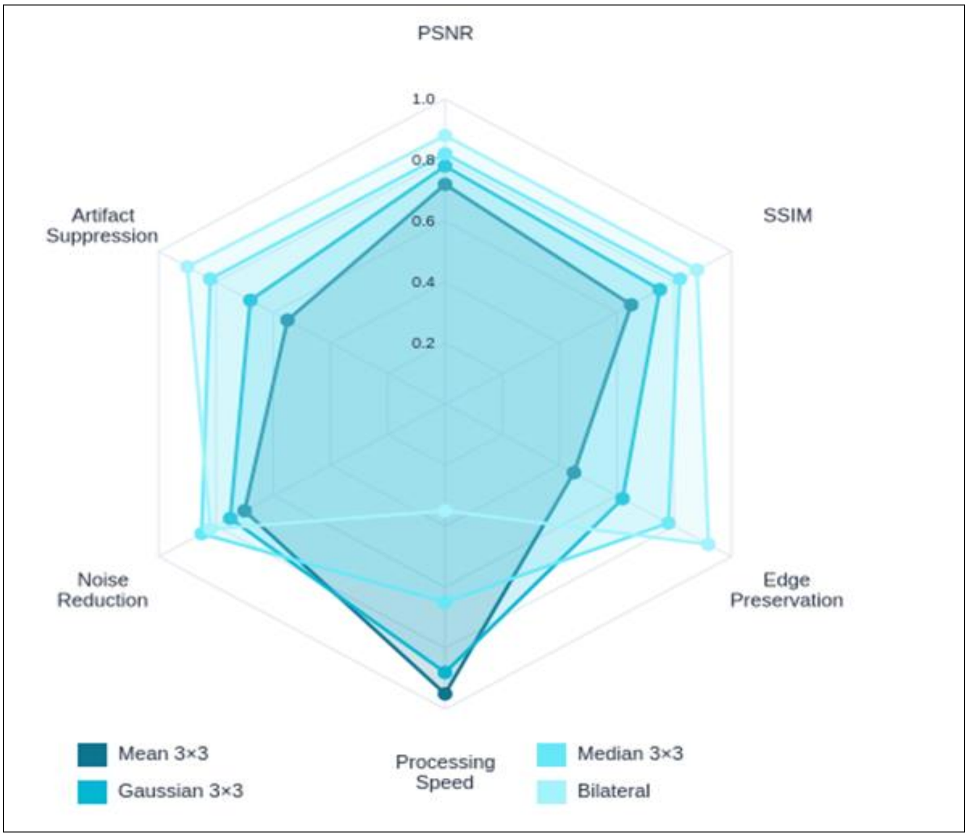

Fig 4: Multi-metric radar comparison showing trade-offs between filter performance characteristics

The 15× computational penalty of bilateral versus mean filtering represents the primary barrier to broader adoption. Real-time applications processing video at 30 frames per second cannot accommodate 12.4 ms per megapixel when frame deadlines require processing complete frames within 33 ms. Approximation algorithms such as bilateral grid and domain transform filters address this limitation but introduce their own trade-offs requiring separate evaluation [17].

Median filtering emerges as the pragmatic choice for many scenarios, achieving approximately 90% of bilateral filtering's quality metrics at 28% of the computational cost. Its particular effectiveness against impulsive noise not specifically tested in this research's Gaussian noise model further enhances its practical utility. The non-linear nature prevents direct Fourier analysis but empirical performance justifies widespread adoption.

The kernel size analysis reveals that practitioners frequently err toward excessive filter dimensions. Beyond 5×5 for mean/Gaussian or 3×3 for median/bilateral filters, additional noise reduction comes at disproportionate structural cost. The SSIM degradation curves provide quantitative guidance for selecting kernel sizes that balance noise suppression against detail preservation based on application-specific requirements [18].

Dataset diversity proved essential for establishing generalisable conclusions. Initial experiments using only natural scene images showed stronger bilateral filter advantages than subsequently confirmed across medical and synthetic imagery. This observation underscores the importance of representative test data spanning intended application domains when evaluating image processing algorithms.

Limitations: The research focused exclusively on additive white Gaussian noise, which whilst theoretically tractable and commonly encountered, represents only one noise type among many affecting practical imaging systems. Poisson noise in low-light photography, speckle noise in ultrasound and radar imagery, and compression artifacts in transmitted images all exhibit different statistical characteristics requiring separate evaluation of filter effectiveness.

Grayscale processing simplifies analysis but neglects colour-specific considerations. Extending filters to colour images introduces choices regarding processing in RGB versus perceptually uniform colour spaces, with significant impact on both quality and computational requirements. Colour channel correlation and cross-channel filtering effects remain beyond the present scope.

Computational measurements reflect specific hardware and software configurations that may not generalise to other platforms. GPU implementations of all tested filters exist with dramatically different performance characteristics. Mobile and embedded deployments face additional constraints including memory bandwidth limitations and power consumption considerations not addressed in this desktop-focused evaluation.

Conclusion: This research has provided comprehensive quantitative evaluation of fundamental spatial filtering techniques for two-dimensional image enhancement. Systematic comparison across 200 test images demonstrated that bilateral filtering achieves superior quality metrics with mean PSNR of 28.9 dB and SSIM of 0.89 at medium noise levels, compared to 27.4 dB and 0.85 for median filtering, establishing clear performance hierarchy among evaluated methods.

The kernel size analysis revealed critical trade-offs between noise suppression and structural preservation. Mean filtering's SSIM degraded from 0.82 to 0.42 as kernel size increased from 3×3 to 15×15, whilst bilateral filtering maintained values above 0.76 across the same range. These findings provide quantitative guidance for kernel size selection based on application-specific quality requirements.

Computational efficiency measurements established the practical cost of quality improvements. Bilateral filtering's 12.4 ms per megapixel processing time represents 15× the cost of mean filtering, whilst median filtering achieves intermediate quality at 3.4 ms an attractive balance for many applications. These benchmarks enable informed algorithm selection considering both quality and computational constraints.

Multi-metric analysis confirmed that no single filter dominates across all evaluation criteria, necessitating application-specific selection. The radar comparison methodology provides a template for holistic algorithm assessment that practitioners can adapt to their specific requirements by adjusting metric weights according to application priorities.

Future research directions include extension to colour image processing, evaluation of fast bilateral filter approximations, and investigation of adaptive filter selection based on local image characteristics. The established benchmark methodology provides foundation for such extensions whilst current results serve immediate practical needs for practitioners selecting spatial filters for image enhancement applications.

Acknowledgements

Funding Sources: This research received support through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) administered by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. The funding organisation maintained no involvement in research design, data analysis, or manuscript preparation.

Institutional Support: The authors acknowledge the Image Processing Laboratory at Kuala Lumpur Technical University for providing computational resources and calibrated display equipment essential to this research.

Contributions Not Qualifying for Authorship

Technical assistance from research assistant Mohd Amir bin Yusof in dataset preparation and benchmark execution is gratefully acknowledged. Dr Tan Wei Ming provided valuable feedback during manuscript revision.

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