

# Real-time screen reading: reducing domain shift for one-shot learning

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## Abstract

Many digital meters such as those used for home health (e.g. blood pressure meters) or meters monitoring industrial equipment do not contain wireless connectivity. Hence, connecting these devices to phone tracking apps or control centres either requires cumbersome manual transcription or is not plausible due to costs. Our motivation is to cheaply retro-fit these types of meters with ‘smart’ data transfer capabilities using a mobile phone app and limited training data. We demonstrate how one can use single training images of meter screens to build efficient custom meter readers targeted to chosen devices. To this end, we build a CNN based system which runs in real-time on mobile device with very high read accuracy (close to 100%). Our contributions include (i) introduction of an exciting new application domain, (ii) a method of training from purely synthetic data by reducing domain shift using a surprisingly simple approach which unlike adversarial training based methods does not even require unlabelled data; (iii) a highly accurate system for parsing digital meter screens and (iv) release of a new screen reading dataset. The system, although trained solely on synthetic data, transfers very well to the real-world. Our method of screen detection and text recognition also improves over the state of the art on our dataset.

## 1 Introduction

A surprisingly high number of different digital meters are actively used by any one person on a day to day basis. Whether this be a scale to measure body weight or a thermometer to check temperature. In fact a large majority of these types of meters are for personal health monitoring *e.g.* blood pressure and blood glucose, *etc.* In clinical and industrial settings the number of digital meters escalates *e.g.* oximeter, spirometer and machine status monitors. With all this data, collection and analysis is valuable, but record keeping is still normally done manually. Not only is this time consuming, it is also prone to human entry error.

To combat this problem, modern meters are gradually becoming ‘smart’, meaning they wirelessly transmit data for remote analysis. This is typically done by pairing the meter with a mobile phone using Bluetooth. However, upgrading equipment to ‘smart’ capabilities is

very costly, particularly in industrial or hospital settings. Furthermore, Bluetooth pairing is a rather slow and cumbersome operation.

We address failings of ‘smart’ meters and manual data entry and propose a vision based system to reliably read meter screens using a mobile phone. Focus is on precise automatic reading, especially essential when handling medical data. To this end, we first recognise and detect the exact model of meter screen and precisely localise screen position. Only then is the display parsed. Tuning our recognition system to the exact target meter means very strict validation schemes can be applied based on display type and screen digit positions, see Figure 1.

Obtaining precise screen coordinates of a particular model of meter is a challenging task for 4 main reasons: 1) screens are typically highly reflective and in some cases mirror like, 2) screens change appearance, 3) hands occlude many types of meters and 4) there are a vast number of meters with very many different screen layouts, manually collecting enough ground truth data of screen positions to cover all variations in lighting, position, camera angle, screen appearance, and backgrounds is very restrictive. Because of this, we propose a one-shot learning approach (*i.e.* only one real template image is labelled) of synthesising the training data by pasting a single labelled image of the target meter (under various transformations) on multiple different backgrounds.

Using synthetic data for object detection is not new, similar methods to ours [5, 6] use in the order of 100s of labelled images per object instance. Here we show how only one image can be used without overfitting. An alternative approach to synthesising data are one-shot-learning methods [17, 20]. However, to date, these methods only provide image axis aligned bounding box detections [9] and do not natively support variation in object size, rotation and perspective transformation (essential for our task). Similarly tracking based approaches such as correlation filtering [2] or long term object trackers [13] (which can be initialised from a single image) do not consider rotation or perspective distortion of the bounding box. Keypoint matching to a single template image theoretically handles these constraints but in our experimental section this is shown to not work in practice.

Recognising text or numbers in generic scenes using neural networks has been addressed by a number of prior works using a two step approach of localisation then recognition [4, 10]. Recently some success has been found by incorporating both localisation and recognition into the same network [16]. In all cases however, localisation does not consider perspective distortion, resulting in systems which either a) fail due to oblique camera angles, or b) require larger networks to cope with larger variation of text.

Here domain shift from synthetic to real data is reduced using a modality converter, see Figure 2. Once trained, our models can be applied to real data for screen detection and perspective distortion correction. As such, a much simpler network for text recognition can be used, this too is trainable from completely synthetic data. Our screen detector assumes a CNN model which the modality converter is plugged into. The modality converter is agnostic to architecture and we evaluate the performance using MobileNet [8] and MaskRCNN [8].

## 2 Method overview

Our system takes as input an image of the target meter and efficiently interprets the values contained on screen. It consists of two parts, (1) a screen detector which recovers the size, location and orientation of the meter screen, and (2) a digit recognizer which is applied to an image of the extracted and rectified screen, see Figure 1 for an overview. These two parts



Figure 1: **Real-time screen reading on mobile phone.** Our system can be trained to read a digital meter screen at near 100% read accuracy for in-the-wild conditions. The system can be trained using only one human labelled image consisting of a binary mask indicating screen and background pixels, and the four corner coordinates of the screen.

are processed using two separate deep convolutional neural networks (CNNs).

**Screen detection.** Our screen detector operates on images of digital meters and recovers the precise four coordinates of the screen corners, forming a quadrangle. Thus, assuming a planar surface of the screen, perspective correction is applied prior to digit recognition. The screen detector consists of a standard CNN backbone architecture, such as VGG16, ResNet or Inception, but with an additional block of layers at the input, which we call the *modality converter*. In order to explain the function of the modality converter we must first briefly describe how the screen detector is trained.

**One-shot training.** Training of the screen detector is accomplished using a single hand labelled template image. Labels consist of a foreground/background mask as well as locations of meter screen corners. This template is fed into our meter synthesizer which generates other examples of this meter under various homographic transformations, settings, lighting and reflections, please see Figure 2 for examples of blood glucose meter synthesis.

**Modality converter.** As the screen detector is trained from generated data there is a strong risk of overfitting or learning artefacts which do not transfer to real world images. The goal of the modality converter is to convert synthetic and real data into a common space where they are indistinguishable from one another. Other works have explored using adversarial training to learn how to transfer to a common feature space [18, 21] or adapt synthetic images so they look as real as possible [18, 21]. These approaches require large amounts of unsupervised data to capture the real data distributions. However, there are many real world applications where obtaining this amount of unlabelled data is impossible. For example, capturing the appearance space of a blood glucose meter under the full range of on screen values (which is part of meter appearance) would not be possible *i.e.* all times and dates and ranges of glucose would require an insurmountable number of blood tests. To overcome the limitations of adversarial training we propose to explore low level and efficient functions for the modality converter, such as edge based filters, colour removal, blurring and using pre-trained filters from a convolutional network. We show experimentally that by choosing the right function one can perform very well on our dataset of meters and surpass state-of-the-art object detectors trained without the added modality converter.

**Digit recognition.** The screen area is rectified and fed to the digit recognizer (another CNN) which extracts strings of characters and labels them according to type *e.g.* date or time. Validation of the strings is also performed.

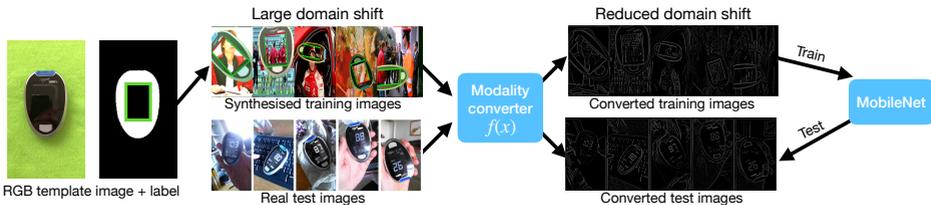


Figure 2: **Reducing domain shift.** A modality converter is applied to synthetic images at train time and real images at test time. Altering the function of the modality converter adjusts the domain shift between real and synthetic data.

### 3 Screen detection

**Template image.** The template image contains the target meter in a frontal facing pose with the screen surface normal pointing at the camera. Ground truth labels consist of the four coordinates of the meter screen in the training image, as well as the foreground/background mask. The label for background should also include the device screen, see Figure 2, so that during application the screen detector learns to ignore screen content. Examples of the ground truth labels for other meters is shown in Figure 9.

**Meter synthesis.** The template image is placed on randomly chosen background images under various different rotations, scales and perspective distortions using alpha matting with the mask. Background images are taken from a dataset of images containing people. This is also appropriate for transfer to real world as person reflection on the meter screens is typical.

**Backbone CNN.** The backbone CNN connects to the modality converter (which is agnostic to the CNN backbone architecture) and performs the screen regression task. We use MobileNet [9] and replace the classification layer with a regression layer to output 8 values representing the four  $(x,y)$  coordinates of the screen and train using an L2 loss. During evaluation it is also show how MaskRCNN [8] or ResNet50 can also be used as a backbone.

### 4 Digit recognition

Preset regions of the rectified screens are associated with the type of text they contain *e.g.* date, time or weight. As the majority of meters have fixed areas for the type of digits displayed, they can initially be defined by hand on the template image. Characters within these regions are then detected individually using a small CNN which we aptly call LeDigit due to similarities with the LeNet5 [14] network from which it is based.

**LeDigit.** The network ingests a grayscale image and produces a heatmap for the location of each class of possible characters (19 classes comprising of: the digits 0-9, symbols ‘:’, ‘.’, ‘-’, ‘am’, ‘pm’ and the letters ‘L’, ‘o’, ‘H’ and ‘i’ (used for certain meters in our dataset). LeDigit is derived from LeNet5 by converting the network into a fully convolutional version and changing the loss to L2 for heatmap regression. The receptive field of the network is 50x25 pixels, which is important to know when scaling the training data appropriately.

**Training.** The training data for LeDigit is completely synthetic. Various combinations of characters are generated, including dates and times, these are augmented in various ways (size, rotation, blurring, erosion/dilation, brightness inversion), then alpha blended with a random background image (see Figure 3 (a) for examples). Associated ground truth

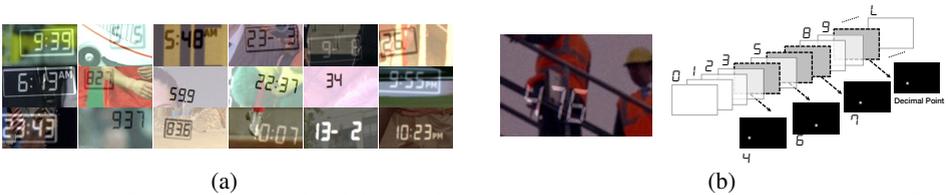


Figure 3: (a) **Example synthetic digit training data** for training the digit recognizer. (b) **Digit heatmaps**. Example synthetic digit image with corresponding goundtruth class heatmaps.

heatmaps (see Figure 3 (b)) per character type are artificially created by positioning a Gaussian kernel at the corresponding character centre. Digits are sized so as to be contained within the receptive field of the network.

**Character string recognition and validation.** Each output channel of LeDigit is thresholded to recover modes of high confidence and scored based on their sum. Modes below a threshold are removed. A line of best fit through remaining modes is found using RANSAC. All modes a set standard deviation from the line are removed. A string of characters are formed by sorting modes according to their class from left to right. These strings are validated using (regular expressions) based on their position in the screen and expected data type *e.g.* date, time or floating point numbers. Appropriate ranges are also checked.

## 5 Experiments

Two datasets are collected to separately evaluate the performance of the two aspects of our method (screen detection and digit recognition). No synthetic data is used during testing only real images of the meters and meter screens are used.

### 5.1 Datasets

**Digital meters.** Our dataset is sourced using 5 diverse digital meters consisting of a blood glucose monitor, kitchen scale, bathroom scale, digital multimeter and a digital body thermometer. Figure 4 illustrates each meter and their display.

**Screen-detection dataset.** This dataset consists of 30 images for each of the digital meters. All images were captured with a mobile phone aspect ratio of 9:16 at a size of 270 by 480 pixels. They contain varying background clutter, rotations, lighting, translations, scale and viewpoint and object occlusions. Please see supplementary material for example images. Screen corner coordinates are manually labelled.

**Digit-recognition dataset.** For of each of the 5 meters, rectified screen images are semi-automatically recorded by running a trained screen detector live on web-cam video and recording screen snapshots. Snapshots are recorded under varying conditions *e.g.* natural/artificial light from different angles and/or backlight turned on/off, meter rotation, scale and numerical readings, see Figure 5 for examples. Snapshots were manually labelled as *valid* if a reading is present, *i.e.* no null values or blank screens, and if all digits were visible. All other images were labelled as *invalid*, these include screens displaying nothing or null values, or images with out of shot digits. *Valid* images were manually tagged with their corresponding numerical readings. For the blood glucose meter, multiple tags are given *i.e.* glucose, time and date, for other meters one tag is sufficient. For the glucose meter 556



Figure 4: **Digital meters** used in our *Screen-detection* dataset. Screen reflection on these glossy displays severely inhibits screen detection and digit recognition.



Figure 5: **Digit-recognition dataset**. 5 example screen snapshots from each of our digital meters is shown. First four columns are *valid* examples with the last column an *invalid* example (marked with red border). Notice the difficulty in recognizing the digits due to lighting and reflections.

screen snapshots were recorded, and for all other meters 50 images per device were collected. Dataset details can be found in Table 2.

## 5.2 Screen detection evaluation protocol

We propose two measures for evaluating screen location against factors important for subsequent digit recognition, which is reliant on very precise localisation. These measures are *vertex difference* and *vertex alignment* which consider these factors by measuring the quality in detecting the corners of the screen.

**Vertex difference.** The predicted screen quadrangle and ground-truth (GT) quadrangle are first normalized by isotropically scaling them so the longest edge of the GT quadrangle is 100 pixels. Average pixel distances between corresponding vertices of the GT and predicted quadrangle is measured.

**Vertex accuracy.** A predicted quadrangle vertex is considered correctly detected if its *vertex distance* is below a set distance threshold  $d$ . Vertex accuracy is recorded as the percentage of correctly detected vertices overall all vertices in the test set.

**Baseline methods.** We compare against a keypoint matching system. Although a non deep learning based approach, we argue it is a challenging competitor. Unlike the state-of-the-art deep learning based object detectors, this system only needs one labelled training image, does not require any data augmentation and is robust to occlusions and screen changes. Keypoints (a mix of AKAZE [10], ORB [19] and Hessian affine [17]) are extracted from within an area of the template image containing only the meter (using the mask) and matched to keypoints in the test image. The homography is used to determine screen coordinates

using LO-RANSAC [9]. We also compare against a ResNet50 network trained to regress screen coordinates and a MaskRCNN network (with and without the modality converter) which is adapted to produce keypoints at screen corners. All CNN models are pre-trained on ImageNet.

### 5.3 Digit recognition evaluation protocol

If a recovered string passes validation (as described in section 4) and precisely matches the ground truth we count this as a successful read. Two types of evaluation are conducted:

**Read accuracy.** The percentage of successful readings from all those which were correctly validated. Because readings are only ever returned to the user when classed as valid, read accuracy can also be viewed as the probability of the system being correct in its returned reading.

**Validation performance.** Because a string which passes validation is more likely to be correct, one could artificially inflate the read accuracy (at the expense of a lower successful read return rate) by being very strict with validation. Therefore, we also measure the validation performance by quantifying the recognizer’s ability in detecting if a presented meter reading is *valid* or *invalid*. Two metrics are used: *validation sensitivity* which measures the proportion of detected *valid* readings, and *validation specificity* which measures the proportion of detected *invalid* readings. Both of these metrics should be high for best performance.

### 5.4 Screen detection

**Image modality experiment.** The performance of screen detection is evaluated under four settings of the modality converter using a MobileNet backbone CNN: (1) *RGB*: retains the RGB input completely, (2) *edge*: modality converter layers are constructed to produce the gradient magnitude image, (3) *grayscale*: an averaging 1x1 convolution is applied to the RGB channels and (4) *random*: modality converter consists of 3 layers of randomly initialised convolutional filters of size 3x3 and linear activations, which upscale and down-scale the channels from 3 to 5 then back to 3. The random mode has the effect of average blurring the input. All models are trained with batch size 25, a learning rate of 0.005, 300,000 iterations/synthetic-images and use the Adam optimizer. Figure 6 shows vertex accuracy for each meter plotted against various threshold levels  $d$ . Notice how using an *edge* modality produces consistently good performance across all meters. With an *RGB* modality more likely to overfit to the training data. *Grayscale* produces worse performance and *random* is the least best all round even though it helps blur edge artefacts left over through synthesis. Please see supplementary video illustrating the quality of the *edge* based model for screen detection in practice - these models never saw a single real image: <https://youtu.be/DmN5cG2F2T4>

**Baseline comparisons** We test our mobile phone based model (MobileNet backbone with *edge* modality) against our baseline methods. Figure 7 shows average performance curves across all meters, along with example output on the glucose meter and multimeter. The MaskRCNN detector is tested using an *RGB* and *edge* modality. The MaskRCNN network uses a ResNet50 backbone, which we test separately using only *RGB* modality. The ResNet50 backbone produces similar results to the MobileNet-RGB backbone (see Figure 6), indicating over-training occurs in both models. MaskRCNN-RGB produces mildly

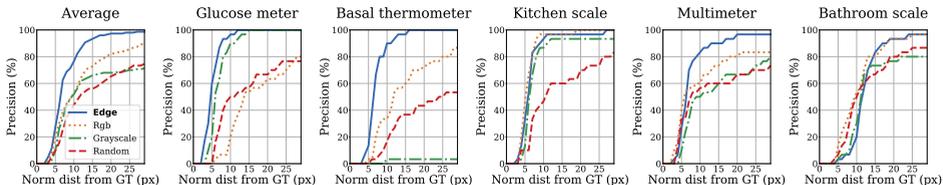


Figure 6: **Modality comparisons.** Precision curves (higher is better) of screen detection show percentage of all predicted screen corner points within a set distance from ground truth. Using an edge modality proves consistently good for all devices.

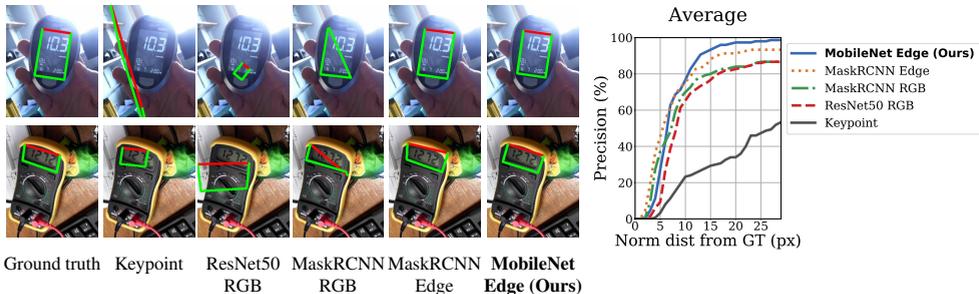


Figure 7: **Baseline comparisons.** Examples of screen detections for two meters (left), quadrangles are shown as green polygons with the red edge indicating screen top. Screen detection precision curves (higher is better) is shown as an average over all meters (right). Our method performs best over all baselines.

better results to these, due to its multi-modal output and use of non-maximum-suppression. MaskRCNN-Edge works better but still not as good as our network, this is because our network produces a structured quadrangle output, whereas the MaskRCNN approach independently predicts screen corner coordinates. The keypoint based method is least successful due to reflectance and textureless surfaces of the meters. Table 1 shows vertex accuracy at  $d = 15\text{px}$  from GT. MobileNet-Edge performs best with 93% accuracy and an average vertex difference of only 9px. In practice our failures occur when there is heavy occlusion of the meter screen, e.g. with a finger.

**Fixed stage training.** As an edge based modality works best, we explore the idea of using pre-trained filters in MobileNet (trained on ImageNet) as modality converters. Pre-trained filters close to the input are known to produce edge like features, hence we experiment with fixing various stages of MobileNet, up to the final global max pooling layer. Fixing up to six stages are tested in total. Each stage corresponds to a downsampling of the spatial dimension. Figure 8(a) shows the vertex accuracy at  $d = 15\text{px}$  vs the number of stages fixed. When tested on real data we unexpectedly observe fixing up to mid-way through the network to produce best results. However these results are consistently worse than all other tested modalities. When testing on synthetic data we observe a decrease in accuracy as stages are fixed. *Edge* and *RGB* modalities produce the worst results. This indicates that fixing pre-trained filters attenuates the domain shift early in the network causing over-training. Whereas an *edge* or *RGB* modality allows the network to regularise and reduces the domain shift, with the *edge* modality being best overall.

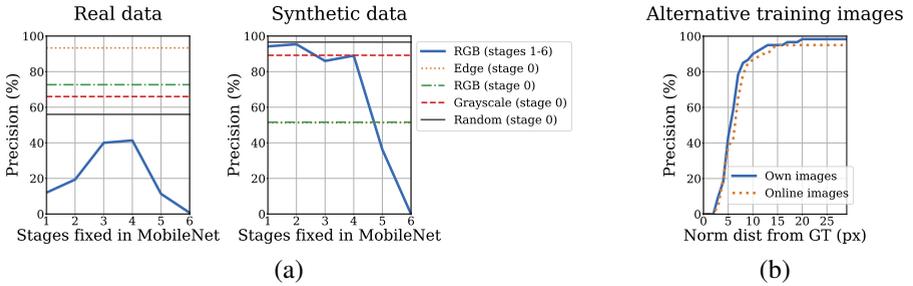


Figure 8: (a) **Staged training of MobileNet**, trained by fixing various stages of the ImageNet pre-trained network. RGB modality when fixing stages 1 to 6 shown as a solid blue line. Performance for having no fixed stages (stage 0) for the RGB and other modalities are shown as a dotted line. (b) **Alternative vs own training images**. Internet shopping sites images and our own images are compared when used as a template during training.

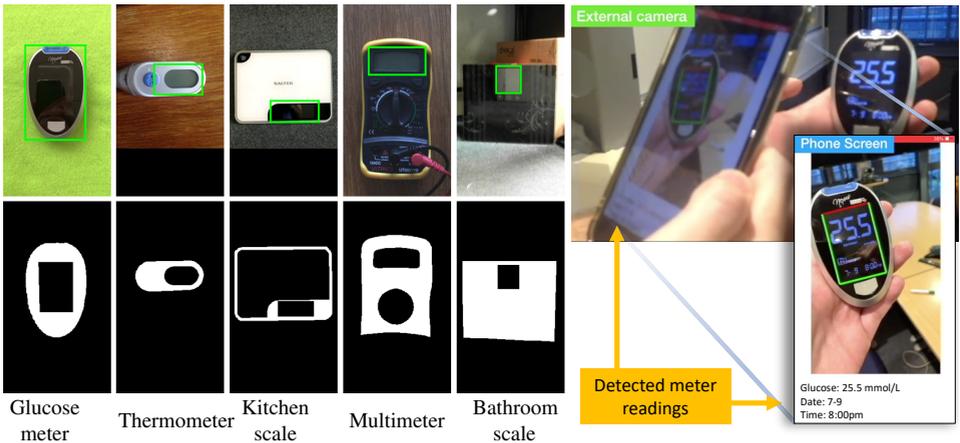


Figure 9: **One shot labels and iOS app**. (Left) image array showing the only training data required by our system for each meter type. Two types of annotation are required; top and bottom row show bounding box and silhouette respectively. (Right) Working demonstration of the iOS app in the wild, please also view video here: <https://youtu.be/DmN5cG2F2T4>

**Alternative training images.** In this experiment we explore training our screen detector (MobileNet -Edge) using out of domain template images of meters sourced from internet shopping sites. These images are normally taken under controlled lighting conditions and from a different camera to our own. Figure 8(b) demonstrates our method can be used to train from images scrapped from the internet with very little loss in accuracy, showing the potential of rapidly training many meter readers.

## 5.5 Digit recognition

Analysis of our digit recognizer was conducted on the *digit-recognition* dataset. Results across all of the digital meters are shown in Table 2. The read accuracy is extremely good across all meters, with all of the meters having greater than 95% accuracy and very high validation sensitivity and specificity close to 100% for all meters. A comparison is formed against two state-of-the-art methods of [14], for reading text in the wild and [15] for reading Google street view door numbers. When applied to our test data they give very poor perfor-

Meter type	Keypoint	ResNet50 RGB	MaskRCNN RGB	MaskRCNN Edge	MobileNet Edge
Blood glucose	90%	50%	70%	100%	100%
Body thermometer	17%	97%	67%	90%	97%
Kitchen scale	17%	97%	100%	93%	97%
Multimeter	80%	60%	90%	97%	90%
Bathroom scale	33%	80%	73%	60%	83%
Avg. vertex accuracy	29%	77%	80%	88%	93%
Avg. vertex difference	171px	18px	14px	19px	9px

Table 1: **Screen detection performance**, measured using vertex accuracy at  $d = 15$ px from GT, per device. Average vertex accuracy along with average vertex difference is shown at the bottom of the table.

Meter type	# Images	# Valid	Range	Units	Validation sensitivity	Validation specificity	Read accuracy
Blood glucose - glucose	556	534	1.1—29.1	mmol/l	99.6%	92.9%	99.8%
Blood glucose - time	556	534	-	am/pm	99.6%	100%	99.8%
Blood glucose - date	556	534	-	NA	99.6%	100%	100%
Body thermometer	50	44	32.2—42.5	Celsius	93.6%	100%	95.5%
Kitchen scale	50	47	0—15.65	grams	93.6%	100%	100%
Multimeter	50	49	0—28.6	volts	100%	100%	98.0%
Bathroom Scale	50	48	18-95	kg	100%	100%	100%

Table 2: **Digit-recognition**. Dataset information and recognition results are shown.

mance and are computationally slower in comparison to our LeDigit and validation system. The method of [10] executes in 30ms but does not give reasonable digit output which we believe is due to the original training set used. [10] executes in 80ms and ours is less than 5ms (our time includes detection, recognition and validation). The method of [10] requires a tight bounding box around the digits of interest. For four of our meters (all but the glucose meter) we manually annotate 200 tight bounding boxes for testing. [10] has an average read accuracy of 8% far lower than our network (we ignore missing symbols in evaluation as this method cannot detect them). [10] uses 7M parameters and ours only 150K.

## 5.6 Computational performance

**TitanX GPU.** On PC with a TitanX GPU, the whole system runs at 20ms per frame.

**Mobile phone.** Per video frame processing time when running the system on an iPhone 11 is: 0.6ms for the digit recognizer and 4ms for the screen detector. The overhead due to manipulating the video frame in memory (cropping, resizing, perspective transform) results in a processing speed of approximately 30fps. Figure 9 illustrates the app in practice.

## 6 Conclusion

Here we demonstrate the possibility of training digital meter screen readers using a single labelled template image and achieve near 100% read accuracy. The approach consists of 1) one-shot-learning through synthesis, 2) our proposed modality converter and 3) an efficient digit recogniser. The system is lightweight and efficient and runs in real time on mobile phone. We demonstrate converting synthetic images during training and real images at run time to edge images remarkably reduces domain shift, producing very good results in real life. Unlike adversarial training methods our approach requires no real unlabelled data. Additionally, we test our method on training from template images taken from out of domain sources *e.g.* internet shopping sites and find our approach still transfers to our use case. Our screen detection method also out performs pre-trained state-of-the-art object detectors fine-tuned to our synthetic data. Although our approach would not work for colour based tasks, we are interested in testing this one-shot learning approach for other appropriate applications. The mobile phone framework is now also employed in a commercial setting by GlucoRx Limited for scanning glucose meter readings and helping with diabetes management of their over 250k patients.

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