EyeHearYou: Probing Location Identification via Occluded Smartphone Cameras and Ultrasound

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Abstract—This paper explores how to localize a device equipped solely with camera sensors by leveraging the unintended response of occluded camera hardware to transmitted ultrasound-specifically, determining with high probability which ultrasound transmission pattern was injected during image capture, based on distinctive ultrasound signals unwittingly detected by the image sensor. Prior device location identification methods require the use of dedicated hardware or protocols, e.g., microphone arrays or GPS. We envision a new potential mechanism by leveraging ubiquitous camera hardware on mobile and IoT devices to receive acoustic signals produced by ultrasonic localization beacons, even when the camera is occluded. We discover that ultrasonic signals affect gyroscopes integral to modern camera sensors' stabilization hardware and induce distinct destabilization signals in the dark images captured by occluded cameras. This work provides theoretical analysis, simulation modeling, and experimental evidence of how this optical acoustic side channel creates different noise patterns in camera images when the camera is subjected to different ultrasound stimuli. Our evaluation with 119 videos captured by a smartphone camera over multiple days shows success in detecting whether the smartphone is near an ultrasonic transmitter that can be associated with different locations.

Index Terms—Optical Acoustic Side Channel, CMOS Image Sensors, Dark Signal, Device Localization, Smartphone Privacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Privacy-oriented guidelines for mobile security often recommend judiciously granting camera and microphone access to user-installed applications, affecting user behavior [1], where some consumers may use lens covers and tape as an occlusion to prevent being observed by unintended recipients. Our work shows that an attacker can still learn information regarding the device location through an optical acoustic side channel even if the camera lens is occluded. As mobile and IoT devices are becoming ubiquitous and integral to a user's daily life, location privacy has become a major concern due to the fact that various information channels could leak the location of a device and its user. For example, global positioning system (GPS), often used for location-based services provided by smartphones, inevitably opens the door for applications to monitor user locations [2], [3]. In addition, microphones on mobile and wearable devices are exploited to receive locationspecific acoustic signals generated by audio transmitters [4], [5], [6]. Given these threats, previous research has invented methods to filter out fine-grained location information from



Fig. 1. **The Threat Model.** Using a dark signal optical acoustic side channel, a target mobile device can be located in a GPS-denied environment using only an occluded camera of a mobile device and ultrasonic transmitters. The target mobile device front and back cameras are covered with privacy guards.

their sensor data [7], [8], or educated users to simply disable GPS and microphones on their devices. Despite these precautions against GPS and microphones which are known to be able to leak location information, this paper investigates a new, complementary threat model that asks the question: How may adversaries possibly identify the location of a device by analyzing the camera images taken by the device, even if the camera lens is occluded? Location privacy leakage due to unwitting sharing of camera photos and videos that contain identifiable landmarks in the image scenes is well known [9], [10], [11]. It is foreseeable that location identification threats through cameras will increase as cameras become one of the most widely deployed types of sensors [12], [13]. However, this work investigates how to achieve location identification with a dark image scene captured by an occluded camera by leveraging ultrasonic beacon signals in the ambient acoustic environment to create distinct features in dark images that seem to contain no usable information. Specifically, ultrasonic signals induce distinct destabilization patterns depending on the image stabilization mechanism used by camera sensors, e.g., optical image stabilization (OIS), electronic image stabilization (EIS), or both, by affecting the mechanical behavior of microelectromechanical systems (MEMS) gyroscopes integrated in these camera sensors. This leads to discernible spatial variance in dark signals of an image. Dark signals are thermally induced signals in image sensors that are dominated by image sensor noise sources due to low levels of image

sensor irradiation [14], [15], [16], such as when a camera lens is occluded. This work discovers that even with occluded camera lenses, the ultrasonic modulated signals differ from ambient acoustic noise signals, enabling the development of a signal correlation-based indicator function to predict device proximity to an ultrasonic transmitter, underscoring potentially leveraging occluded cameras for localization.

To probe the characteristics, and provide preliminary existence proof, of this optical acoustic side channel, our work develops a simulation model that aims to validate how the ultrasonic attack signal, at the resonant frequency of the gyroscope, modulates the camera response. In addition, we perform experiments with the camera of a commercial-off-of-the-shelf (COTS) smartphone and an ultrasonic speaker transmitting sinusoidal pulse and sweep waveforms at a distance of up to 0.28 m from the smartphone. Our simulation and experiments demonstrate strong correlations between the ultrasound signals around the camera hardware and the spatial variance of dark images captured by the occluded smartphone camera. Based on these observations, we develop a low-resource signal indicator to identify whether the occluded camera is near an ultrasonic transmitter that can be associated with a known location. The signal indicator holds a given signal as a baseline by computing the maximum correlation coefficient of the baseline signal against itself, and then it compares the maximum correlation coefficient of an incoming input signal against the baseline maximum correlation coefficient.

Our results show that the signal indicator could reliably distinguish between ultrasound-modulated signals and ambient acoustic noise signals across different ultrasonic transmission patterns and image stabilization settings. We evaluate the signal indicator using a MATLAB simulation on a dataset consisting of 119 videos captured by the occluded camera in various environmental settings and observe a near 99.9% accuracy in detecting whether there is an ultrasound signal around the occluded camera for a given camera configuration. In addition, we analyze the impact of key camera configuration parameters such as optical zoom, exposure time, rolling shutter rate, and image sensor size, among others. Finally, we discuss the limitations of our simulations and short-distance experiments, and how future research could leverage the analysis methodology provided in this work to design feasibility studies in more diverse scenarios. To summarize, our work has the following contributions:

- A threat model of using open and occluded cameras to receive ultrasonic signals for device location identification. The threat model completes existing GPS and microphone-based approaches and enables more ubiquitous localization capability in camera-only IoT devices.
- A methodology for acquiring ultrasound information from a dark image scene captured by occluded cameras. Our analysis of how ultrasound modulates image stabilization patterns presents an exploitable optical acoustic side channel.
- Simulation and experimental results. Our results provide preliminary evidence for the existence of such optical

acoustic side channels and a foundation for future implementation to build upon.

II. BACKGROUND & RELATED WORK

Optical Acoustic Side Channels. Sound is a mechanical wave that can impart energy to any surface it strikes. The kinetic energy of sound waves can cause slight deviations on the surfaces of objects, which can be observed as pixel displacements using lenses to extract motion vectors and reconstruct the original sound [17], [18], [19]. Images acquired using mobile devices can be used to reconstruct sound from motion vectors of pixel displacements in images, where the pixel displacement is imparted in sequential image frames due to the kinetic energy of sound waves moving the springs holding the camera lens [20]. Pixel displacements in images caused by sound energy are amplified by the rolling shutter of image sensors because the shutter mechanism exposes and reads out sequential pixel rows from top to bottom. Note that sound reconstruction via the rolling shutter effect is possible in part due to the dynamic range of pixel intensities in an irradiated sensor image, i.e., an image taken with camera exposure [14], but a unirradiated sensor image will lack dynamic range as most intensity values will be nil; therefore, using images lacking dynamic range in pixel intensities is challenging for optical acoustic side channels.

Image Stabilization. Camera stabilization methods are useful for optical acoustic side channels [21], [20], [22]. Unwanted device movement while taking an image or capturing a video can cause motion artifacts, such as blurs, in the captured media. Optical image stabilization (OIS) involves the compensatory movement of a lens in the opposite direction to an image sensor in order to correct for motion blurs, often using micro-mechanical electronic systems (MEMS), such as gyroscopes [23], [24]. Electronic image stabilization (EIS) is a software-only counterpart of OIS, and corrects motion artifacts using signal processing [25]. In this paper, we configure different image stabilization mechanisms for a camera to determine their effect on the resultant dark signal camera responses.

Sound-Based Localization. Sound-based localization determines the location of a target using the direction of arrival (DOA) of sound waves and the distance between the transmitters and the receivers [26], [27], [28]. Measures used in soundbased localization compute time of arrival (TOA), time difference of arrival (TDOA), or time of flight (TOF) of the transmitted signal, providing high accuracy measurements while incurring an equipment cost, thus limiting scalability [27]. Ultrasound-based device localization techniques use sound frequencies near or greater than 20 kHz to localize a target, but have variable accuracy due to time-based measurements [29], [30], [31] [32]. Recent sound-based localization techniques improve on problems related to multi-path interference [29], or improving 2D accuracy [30] since pioneering work such as Cricket [32] and DOLPHIN [28]. However, accuracy gains from neural network-based methods are hindered by the need for training data, and computational complexity of the methods [31]. We develop a low-resource signal processingbased method for device localization. Our approach does not require sound direction of arrival estimation, or time synchronization between the transmitter and image sensor. Our results remain consistent across different optical and hybrid zoom settings using two different image sensors, and different sets of camera and transmitter parameters, indicating that the observed phenomena are intrinsic properties of the optical system.

III. THREAT MODEL

The EyeHearYou threat model is centered on an optical acoustic dark signals side channel in mobile device cameras where the amplitude of mean pixel intensities of an occluded camera can be modulated using an external driving force. The threat model transmitter is an ultrasound source, and the transceiver is an occluded camera of the target mobile device. The occluded camera is a transceiver because it both receives the ultrasound signal, and transmits a signal to indicate device proximity to the transmitter.

Adversary Motivation. The adversary wants remote device localization in a GPS-denied environment, and does not have access to an indoor positioning system, e.g., WiFi, or dedicated surveillance equipment. The adversary also lacks direct (line of sight) or indirect scene information of the target or its environment. The adversary can access the target mobile device camera, but when the adversary remotely accesses the camera, the position of the device results in low light, or occluded, conditions at either the front, rear, or both cameras.

Device Characteristics. The adversary performs the attack via a user-installed application which grants camera access; user-installed applications, such as QR code or PDF scanners, are a well-known attack vector for gaining access to smartphone cameras [33], [34]. User studies have shown that most mobile device users are more concerned about granting microphone access than camera access to mobile device applications [1], and as such user-installed mobile device applications are increasingly denied microphone access [35]. Therefore, we assume a scenario in which the adversary targets a single device via a user-installed application, and the user-installed application has denied microphone access. The target device is any commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) mobile device with gyroscope-based image stabilization, which includes most modern smartphones and tablets [36], [37], [38].

Adversary Capabilities. The adversary has remote access to the camera of a target mobile device, and will acquire a signal indicator (SI) from a video recording alerting the adversary to the target device being within range of a transmitter. Once the adversary has a location of interest (LOI) in mind, an attack is carried out as described in Figure 2. The adversary can create a set of known nodes η by placing ultrasonic transmitters within the LOI, and enable on-device video processing to remotely acquire an SI, where each node η' transmits a characteristic ultrasonic frequency within the range of the device gyroscope and movable lens resonant frequency. We assume that the adversary will create a network of nodes to cover an LOI area such that the target device is always within range of a transmitter. By doing video processing on-device and acquiring the SI, the adversary precludes video upload latency and bandwidth limitations. The adversary will likely turn on the video recording periodically, or as needed, so as not to consume too much target device resources.

IV. PROBLEM FORMULATION

In this section, the occluded camera problem is formulated, and the constraints determining the practicality and scalability of the ultrasound transmitter network are defined.

1) Camera Block and Response Intensity: We define an occluded camera as a mobile device camera that has an occlusion on both the rear and front cameras. The universal set T_{θ} of target device T device positions, $t_{\theta} \in \{t_{\theta_1}, \ldots, t_{\theta_k}\}$ for K positions results in a signal μ_{y} from the camera where the linear response of the camera is for a normalized pixel intensity $x \in [0,1]$ [14] modified by the device position t_{θ} . If the adversary can access the camera of a target mobile device, and the device is not occluded simultaneously at both the front and rear cameras, such as while the target device is in use, then either the front or rear camera can be used to surreptitiously make note of the target's indoor location, and no further method of inquiry may be required for target surveillance. We consider the threat model for $T_{\theta,B} \subset T_{\theta}$ where both the front and back cameras are simultaneously occluded for prolonged periods of time, such as when the target mobile device owner is ambulatory or stationary for 10 secs or longer in a GPS-denied environment. Studying the camera response under this entire set of device positions is out-of-scope for this paper, and accordingly we set t_{θ} as either open $(t_{\theta,O})$ or occluded $(t_{\theta,B})$. Some examples of how an occluded camera occurs naturally under normal use of a smartphone include, for example, placing a device a) in a bag, b) in a pocket, c) facedown on a desk with a privacy-oriented camera cover for the rear camera, or d) on its back inside a wallet case, which occludes the front camera.

For an occluded camera, the signal acquired by the adversary will be characterized by a $t_{\theta,B}$ such that $\mu_{y(x,t_{\theta,B})} <<$ $\mu_{y(x,t_{\theta})}$, which we will refer to as μ_{blk} and μ_y , respectively. The mean intensity amplitude is modulated by an ultrasound signal at the resonant frequency of the device gyroscope and movable camera lens, and a set of configurable channel functions $F_c = \{f_{c_1}(.), \ldots, f_{c_C}(.)\}$ for *C* functions under adversary control, where a given channel function f_c affects either the transmitted attack signal, or the modulated response of the transceiver. In Table I we present a summary of channel functions evaluated in this paper for both the transmitter and the transceiver, and describe their functionality for the threat model.

2) Device Localization: Given a set of known ultrasonic transmitter nodes η with a node η' , we define the device localization problem with an upper bound l_{max} of distance for which a receiver can detect a transmitter signal in a given

¹Frequencies used for evaluations withheld for responsible disclosure.



Fig. 2. The Attack System Design. The adversary configures channel functions for the ultrasound signal transmitter and the user-installed mobile application, which acts as a transceiver. The occluded camera signal amplitude is modulated by ultrasound (s_{atk}) , and the adversary uses Steps 1-5 to localize a device using camera responses (μ_{atk}) from unique ultrasound patterns for each location. The occluded ambient acoustic noise (μ_{blk}) is acquired beforehand, and also processed using steps 2-4. The open camera response is shown for comparison. The underlying mechanism for the camera response which produces the ultrasound-modulated signals is destabilization of mechanisms used to correct camera blurs or motions, such as the device movable lens, or device gyroscope. A) An occluded camera field of view, $FOV_{Occluded}$, has neither depth nor spatial information, and the resultant camera response gives a unirradiated sensor image. The springs are part of the movable lens structure, and used for mechanical camera stabilization. B) Gyroscope-based camera stabilization is used by both OIS and EIS mechanisms.

TABLE I THREAT MODEL CHANNEL FUNCTIONS

Channel Function	Parameters	Functionality	Controls
OIS	On/Off	Enable/Disable	Camera
EIS	On/Off	Enable/Disable	Camera
Exposure (ms)	{10,20,40,80,100}	Set	Camera
Frame Rate (fps)	30	Set	Camera
ISO	400	Set	Camera
Zoom	$\{1X, 3X, 12X\}$	Set	Camera
Frame Size (Pixels)	1080×1920	Set	Camera
Pulse Frequency (Hz)	$\left\{ \omega_1, \ldots, \omega_N \right\}^{I}$	Set	Transmitter
Pulse Interval (s)	{1.5, 8}	Set	Transmitter
Pulse Pattern	{Pulse, Sweep}	Set	Transmitter
Pulse Start Phase (deg)	0	Set	Transmitter
Filter Range (Hz)	$\{ \ \omega_1 \ , \ \omega_2 \ \}$	Set	SI

system, and the system is viable for all distances $\leq l_{max}$. Each node η' transmits a signal as defined by the adversary, and there is no communication between the nodes. Let the ultrasonic signal modulating an image frame f be a sine wave over a time period t with amplitude A, phase φ , and frequency ω , $s_{atk} = sin(\varphi + \pi \omega t)A$. The attack sequence involves collecting an ambient acoustic noise signal from the target mobile device before pulsing all transmitters, and using a lookup table to identify the location using the signal correlation.

Signal Indicator. The adversary's goal is to configure a subset of channel functions to differentiate between μ_{blk} and μ_{atk} , the ultrasound modulated signal from an occluded camera, by using the signal indicator (SI),

$$SI(\mu_{in}) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } R(\mu_{in}, \mu_{blk}) \neq R(\mu_{blk}, \mu_{blk}), \\ 0, & \text{if } R(\mu_{in}, \mu_{blk}) = R(\mu_{blk}, \mu_{blk}). \end{cases}$$
(1)

The SI compares the correlation between a given camera response, μ_{in} , and an existing ambient acoustic noise baseline signal, μ_{blk} , as described in Equation []. The ambient baseline

is fixed, and is acquired by the adversary before beginning the ultrasound transmission. In this paper we show that the camera destabilization frequency response to ultrasound at its resonant frequency creates minute movements of the camera lens such that the movement of the lens creates a camera response where the spatial variance of the pixel intensities can be filtered to a signal which is correlated differently to the ambient acoustic noise signal in that same setting.

Attack Range. The adversary can use the resonant frequencies of the device and camera gyroscopes via one of two modes, pulses or sweeps, which broadens the adversary's node network. For example, if a given device has multiple resonant frequencies, then the lower bound of the adversary's node network is $\omega \times \varphi \times 2$ (modes), with a theoretical upper limit available through phase modulation of the signal [39], [40], [41]. As such, an adversary can create a network of nodes in a given location of interest, where each node is spaced by the maximum distance l_{max} . Note current ultrasonic transmitters have a 4 m to 11 m range [42], [43].

V. OPTICAL ACOUSTIC SIDE CHANNEL WITHOUT SCENE INFORMATION

In this section we describe the functional mapping of the ultrasonic signal from the transmitter, s_{atk} , to the SI of the observed occluded camera response, $\mu_{atk} : s_{atk} \times (G_c \subset F_c) \rightarrow SI$, where G_c is a set of channel functions for the attack. The adversary is interested in acquiring a camera response μ_{atk} which has pixel intensities characterized by image sensor dark signals created during low light conditions from its position t_{θ} , and a subset of channel functions G_c for the transmitter and transceiver. The camera response under ultrasonic acoustic pressure is distinct from the image sensor dark signals created during low light conditions and ambient sound, μ_{blk} . The mean intensity of the camera response when



Fig. 3. **Open and Occluded Ultrasound-Modulated Camera Responses.** Normalized mean intensity for ultrasound signal induced camera responses does not vary as much as spatial variance for those same signals, as seen in B) and D). The filtered response is computed as the difference between the normalized mean intensity and the offset spatial variance, and then used as an input for the signal indicator function. Camera responses shown here are from videos recorded at 10 ms exposure at 30 fps. The y-axis scale between different camera responses is not normalized to provide a sense of the range of variation.

the camera is open and experiencing ambient sound is simply μ_y . We simulate the camera response under open and occluded ultrasound modulated conditions to understand how to develop a signal indicator which can differentiate between real-world ambient and ultrasound modulated camera responses.

A. Camera Ultrasound Response Model

Dark Signals. A camera works by irradiating an image sensor over exposure time, t_{exp} . The amount of subsequent charge generation resulting from the photoelectric effect following image sensor irradiation is dependent in part on light intensity and the number of active pixels, $M \times N$, in a pixel array. Following charge collection and conversion over a number of steps in the sensor circuit, the resultant digital output signal μ_{μ} from an image sensor is assumed to increase linearly with radiant exposure. However low light conditions, such as when the camera lens is occluded, result in lower amounts of photogenerated charge, and in this case the camera response is primarily characterized by dark current and image sensor noise sources. Dark current is charge randomly generated by electrons discharged from a pixel without sensor irradiation due to the thermal energy of the image sensor, and starts accumulating as soon as exposure begins [44], [16]. An occluded camera signal is in part produced by both dark current and an offset, the dark signal value at zero exposure which guides its fixed pattern noise [14]. Dark signal is amplified following longer collection and integration, such as by increasing t_{exp} directly, or by setting an exposure value by modifying the camera ISO. The camera ISO is a standardized scale for modifying the camera's exposure value [45]. Blocking a camera lens results in a diminished field of view, as seen in Figure 2A, and the new projection is an $M \times N$ dark frame, f, lacking both a dynamic range of pixel intensities and spatial information. The goal of the threat model is to modulate the limited information in the frame f.

Electronic Rolling Shutter Transceiver for Ultrasonic Signals. Whereas prior works have shown the amplification of pixel displacements in irradiated sensor images due to sound energy [46], [47], [48], [49], we find that the image sensor rolling shutter also encodes the amplitude variance of an ultrasonic signal, s_{atk} , as spatial information on a unirradiated sensor image frame. Assuming that the mean intensity of an open camera without noise sources remains stable overtime, then adding a sound which shifts the lens produces pixel deviations overtime in accordance with the lens movement, such that the mean camera response for f becomes $\mu_{atk} = sin(\varphi + pi\omega\varsigma)A$, where ς is $V\tau r$. The time series V $\left\{n \cdot \frac{1}{\lfloor \frac{r}{M} \rfloor} \mid n \in \mathbb{Z}, 0 \le n \cdot \frac{1}{\lfloor \frac{r}{M} \rfloor} < 2\right\}$, where *n* is an integer, represents the change in mean pixel intensity for a given sequence of frames. The electronic rolling shutter readout, r, is the rate at which the shutter sequentially reads M rows, and the interval τ is the time between successive ultrasonic pulses in seconds. The camera response is subject to random and fixed sources of noise, which we include as,

$$\mu_{atk} = \sin(\varphi + \pi\omega\varsigma)A + NF(\phi(m) + P^{\kappa}(\lambda))$$
(2)

where Gaussian (ϕ) and Poisson (*P*) noise can be parameterized using different values of *m* and λ to set the mean of their respective distributions. The NF is a noise factor which can be modified in place of independently configuring the parameters for the noise functions, and κ modifies the Poisson contribution of dark current shot noise, which may increase with exposure.

Given that the mean intensity of a signal includes sources of random and fixed noise, we compute the spatial variance of the signal to reduce the noise, and amplify the pixel intensity deviations. The gray values in two images taken at the same exposure will vary slightly because of temporal noise, but the pixel intensity offset of the image sensor ensures that the nonuniformity remains stationary across two different frames as fixed pattern noise [14]. Consequently, the temporal noise variance across two images taken at the same exposure can be expressed as spatial variance with a pixel offset size O as,

$$s^{2} = \frac{1}{MN} \left(\sum_{m=0}^{M-1} \sum_{n=0}^{N-1} f_{1}[m]_{\delta_{M}}[n]_{\delta_{N}} f_{2}[m]_{\delta_{M}}[n]_{\delta_{N}} \right) - \mu_{f_{1}} \mu_{f_{2}}$$
(3)

where $\delta_M = M - O$ and $\delta_N = N - O$. Note that pixel intensity offset intrinsic to the image sensor is different from the pixel offset size O we use for computing the offset spatial variance. In general, a pixel from a occluded video frame may have intensities $m_i \ge 0, n_j \ge 0$ because of the dark signal pixel intensity offset and nonuniformity, various image sensor noise sources, and some light always incident to the sensor. In summary, mean intensity is the camera response which includes sources of both random and fixed noise, e.g., from readout [15]. We compute the spatial variance of each subsequent frame with a pixel offset size O determining the range of pixel rows and columns selected to average the signal response, which produces a $L \times 1$ time series. The filtered camera response is acquired as the difference of the normalized mean intensity and offset spatial variance, and is used the input for the signal indicator function.

B. Attack Feasibility

In this section, we provide evidence as existence proof for the underlying mechanism of an optical acoustic side channel attack using image sensor dark signals guided by two research questions,

- 1) **RQ 1:** How can information still be captured from an optical system with an occluded camera lens? Our hypothesis is that dark signal pixel intensities produce a modulated camera response based on the camera destabilization from ultrasound. We validate this by using the μ_{atk} (Equation 2) modulation model to simulate camera response signals and compare them to signals acquired from open and occluded cameras.
- 2) RQ 2: How can occluded camera information be utilized in a device localization threat model? We hypothesize, that depending on the set of channel functions, the signal produced under ambient and ultrasound conditions will be uncorrelated, and thus using an ambient acoustic noise signal as a baseline will enable developing an indicator function to determine device proximity to a transmitter. To validate this hypothesis, we compute the correlation between the ultrasound-modulated camera response and the baseline ambient acoustic noise signal for a given set of channel functions.

Ultrasonic Modulation of Unirradiated Pixel Intensities. Our first goal is to find a clear camera response to utilize in a threat model as occluded camera signals can be noisy. Figure compares the spatial variance, as defined in Equation 3, and the mean intensity of signals acquired from image sensors under both occluded and open lens conditions, with ultrasound. For the existence proof tests, a Samsung smartphone with an occluded camera lens is placed 0.5 cm from an ultrasonic speaker on a tripod, while a sine wave with a peak-to-peak voltage of 20 V is pulsed every 8 seconds; we increase the distance to 28 cm (0.28 m) for evaluations. We also record ambient recordings, where no ultrasound is played. We observe that the occluded camera signal lacks sufficient dynamic range, such that the normalized mean intensity of ultrasound modulated responses, μ_{atk} , does not vary over time relative to the normalized mean intensity of occluded ambient recordings, μ_{blk} , as seen in Figure 3 B and D.

While the occluded camera signal lacks dynamic range, the lens movement induced by the ultrasonic signal creates areas of varying pixel intensities within a frame. As a result, computing the spatial variance of the signal makes the modulation of the ultrasonic signal more apparent. Figure 3 shows greater variation in the spatial variance of μ_{atk} compared to μ_{blk} . When comparing the occluded camera scenarios, Figure 3 B and D, to the open camera scenarios, Figure 3 A and C, we observe regions of lens movement in the occluded ultrasound cases, coupled with shifts in frequencies in corresponding time points in the spectrograms. This suggests that the optical stabilization mechanisms are vulnerable to providing information about the acoustic signal, even when the camera lens is occluded. Previous research on optical acoustic side channels has typically relied on visual access to the scene for exploitation. However, this result indicates that visual scene access is not necessary for exploiting ultrasonic signals and dark frame signal analysis.

Ultrasound Modulated Camera Response vs. Intrinsic Camera Noise. The ultrasound signal in the occluded camera can be observed by comparing the modulated occluded and ambient occluded camera responses in the frequency domain. While the ambient occluded camera responses are dominated by readout noise, which occurs at periodic intervals, the ultrasound modulated filtered responses are relatively greater in magnitude, as seen in Figure [3] and have varying frequencies at intervals outside of readout noise time. Additionally, comparing the mean intensity of modulated occluded vs. ambient occluded signals shows that ultrasound can stabilize the signal to remove readout noise, as seen in Figure [5].

Camera Response Simulation. We develop a simulation of the open and occluded camera responses to determine how each optical system parameter is responsible for a given camera response. From our experiments, we know that when a camera is open and ultrasound is played, the lens jumps vigorously, which is a known effect of the gyroscope frequency response to sound at its resonant frequency [22], [50], [51]. In Figure 4, a μ_{atk} signal modulated by ultrasound and $G_c = \{OIS, EIS, 10 \text{ ms exposure}, 30 \text{ fps}, 400 \text{ ISO}, 1080\}$ \times 1920 image size, a transmission frequency, 8 secs pulse interval, and a filter frequency is shown. The signal model, shown in Figure 4, is the modulated open camera response to destabilization without noise sources, where the peaks of the signal arise from destabilization of the optical system upon receiving ultrasound. The interconnecting arms between the signal peaks are when ultrasound transmission is turned off. Removing the sensor readout frequency, r, and pulse interval τ



Fig. 4. **Simulated vs. Real Signals.** The μ_{atk} signal obtained from open and occluded OIS/EIS camera responses are simulated (in gray) and shown against their real counterparts (in blue). The real camera response shows when the camera shakes due to the received ultrasound, where the interlocking arms indicate when the sound is off. The simulated signal is produced by configuring rolling shutter rate r and ultrasound interval pulse τ , and then by adding noise to the signal model, as shown in Equation [2] The amplitude of the occluded signal model is very small in comparison, and shown in the zoom-in inset. For the occluded simulated camera response, the contribution of the Poisson noise was multiplied with -1 to achieve the downward spikes.

produces a less stable looking signal which deviates from the camera response. Changing the noise parameters of Equation 2 changes the correlation of the simulated μ_{atk} to the realworld μ_{atk} , which is likely because dark current shot noise in the image sensor arises from a Poisson process [15], and all gyroscopes have Gaussian noise [52]. We then model the occluded camera response as a signal with a relatively lower amplitude as we do not expect nearly the same amplitude of pixel shifts as the open camera response to sound. Adding noise sources to the simulated occluded model produces a camera response which matches a real-world occluded camera response, for example as shown by comparing a simulated μ_{atk} normalized mean response to real-world μ_{atk} normalized mean response. Therefore, low-level pixel intensities in an occluded camera can be modulated using ultrasound in the absence of image sensor irradiation.

Movable Lens vs. Gyroscope Destabilization. There are at least two optical stabilization mechanisms an adversary can exploit in this threat model. This is confirmed by comparing occluded camera recordings to open camera recordings for both ultrasonic signals (μ_{atk}) and ambient recording (μ_{blk}) scenarios while configuring the image stabilization method. For ambient recordings, the experiment procedure is the same as described for the occluded camera video capture, except in this case ultrasound is not played while recording. Normally, when camera stabilization is enabled and ultrasound is played, a camera shake can be visually observed on screen when the camera is open, and as expected a camera shake does not appear when camera stabilization is disabled and ultrasound is played. However, it appears that lens destabilization from the ultrasound is apparent in image analysis from occluded camera recordings when both OIS and EIS are disabled, even though a camera shake does not visibly show up when the camera is open and OIS/EIS is disabled during ultrasound transmission video recording. We reason that a secondary mechanism is enabling lens movement in this case, which is likely the movable lens of the device camera. But it is unclear

 SIGNALS (0.5 CM, S2, PULSE)

 Trial
 Max Coeff.
 Signal In
 Baseline Signal

CT

 TABLE II

 MAXIMUM CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR A SUBSET OF OCCLUDED

11141	Max Coeff.	Signal III	Dasenne Signai	51
1	158	{10ms,None,Signal}	{10ms,None,Ambient}	1
2	181	{10ms,EIS,Signal}	{10ms,EIS,Ambient}	1
3	108	{20ms,None,Signal}	{20ms,None,Ambient}	1
4	93	{20ms,EIS,Signal}	{20ms,EIS,Ambient}	1
5	82	{40ms,None,Signal}	{40ms,None,Ambient}	1
6	121	{40ms,EIS,Signal}	{40ms,EIS,Ambient}	1
7	119	{80ms,None,Signal}	{80ms,None,Ambient}	1
8	86	{80ms,EIS,Signal}	{80ms,EIS,Ambient}	1

if the lens movement is due to a second camera gyroscope, or simply due to the movement of the lens springs.

C. Signal Indicator for Modulated Camera Responses

To use ultrasound modulated dark signals for a device localization attack, we develop a signal indicator to differentiate between an ultrasound modulated camera response vs. an ambient camera response. When sources of kinetic energy, such as sound, transfer that energy to a microelectromechanical sensor upon impact, the vibrational frequency of the sensor matches the frequency of the driving source of kinetic energy, but the sensor's new vibrational frequency has a lag relative to the frequency of the sound source [53]. If the occluded camera pixel intensities do get modulated by ultrasound signal, due to either the gyroscope or the movable lens springs being struck by ultrasound, then the camera response signal will be correlated to the attack signal. Cross-correlation is an operation which can determine the displacement of one time series relative to another, and is often used as a measure of signal similarity. The existence proof experiments, Figures 3and 5, that two camera responses acquired under the same conditions, but one modulated with ultrasound pulses, have different frequency spectra. This explains why two ambient acoustic noise signals are more correlated versus signals where

5mm, 40ms, OIS/EIS Camera Occluded Signal Injection

5mm, 40ms, OIS/EIS Camera Occluded Ambient
Spatial Variance with Offset

400



Fig. 5. **OIS/EIS Spatial Variance and Spectrograms for 40 ms Signals.** While signal spikes do not show up clearly over the time-axis for the modulated signal, the spectrograms of the modulated and ambient acoustic noise signals show different frequency content. The ambient acoustic noise signal shows readout spikes, but readout noise is suppressed in the ultrasound modulated signal, though its signal amplitude is lower. Ultrasound modulated signals seem to experience an increase or decrease in amplitude, likely due to the phase of the incoming sound wave.



Fig. 6. **3D View of 40 ms exposure OIS Signal Frequencies.** Visualizing the signals using a three-dimensional view of the frequency domain helps show the extent of their modulation from ultrasound. The amplitude of the occluded ambient acoustic noise signal is lower, and shows readout spikes.

one is ambient and the other is modulated by ultrasound, as shown in Table \blacksquare

VI. EVALUATIONS

In this section, we describe the experimental methodology to confirm our findings from the existence proof analysis of RQ1 and RQ2. This is done by implementing the methodology as outlined in Section IV-2 to enable the adversary to estimate the cross-correlation of transceiver signals and a baseline ambient acoustic noise signal for a given set of channel functions. Real-world camera responses modulated by real-world s_{atk} are evaluated by configuring the channel functions shown in Table I.

A. Experimental Methodology

Generating Ultrasound. Ultrasound is generated using a DG5072 function generator (2-channel, 70 MHz) to produce a sine wave with a peak-to-peak amplitude of 20 V and start phase of 0 deg, and transmitted through a Vifa omnidirectional ultrasonic speaker (Part 60409). A portable singlechannel ultrasonic power amplifier is used for the speaker, powered by an external AC power supply. A digital laser measure helps confirm distance between the ultrasonic speaker and the device, where the device is held in place using a tabletop tripod at 0.5 cm (0.005 m) and 28 cm (0.28 m) from the ultrasonic speaker.



Fig. 7. Occluded and Open Camera Setup. Occluded camera is on the left, open camera is on the right. An on-device application is used to record the experienced lack of sensor irradiation by the rear camera. Lux is a unit of sensor illumination, and a lux of ≈ 0 implies the sensor is not receiving enough light to change the reading for the on-device application.

Rear Camera Blocking. To emulate low light conditions and encourage dark signal generation, the rear camera of a target device is covered with aluminum foil and secured in place with duct tape. By using an on-device light meter application, the experienced irradiation of the main device rear camera is recorded. The camera blocking is shown in Figure 7 along with the in-app sensor irradiation metrics. Note that some light will always irradiate an image sensor through small gaps between the contact surfaces of a cover and the device, or pinhole-sized gaps in the weaves of fabric threads. The evaluation experiments are performed on two sensors of the rear camera of a Samsung Galaxy S20 5G using three different combinations for optical and hybrid zoom, as indicated in Table III. While not used for evaluations, we try to reproduce the ultrasonic attack on the iPhone 15 Pro Max (2023).

Data Collection. The exposure and image stabilization configuration of the target device is varied using Mobile AR

TABLE III ZOOM SETTING AND DEVICE IMAGE SENSOR

Zoom	Sensors	Туре
1X	S2	Optical
3X	S2	Hybrid
12X	S1, S2	Hybrid

Sensor (MARS) Logger [54], or the default camera. The ISO and frame rate values are held constant at 400 and 30 fps, respectively. The open rear camera is focused on an image pattern, or a plain white wall. For open or occluded camera recordings with ultrasound, the signal is pulsed at 1.5 secs or 8 secs intervals (Pulse Transmission). A 5 secs linear sweep is generated using the function generator with start and end frequencies to capture at least two resonant frequencies of the device gyroscope (Sweep Transmission). Our classification accuracy is on the entire dataset, unless stated otherwise (n=119), and videos are collected over multiple days.

Signal Processing and Classification. We developed a program in MATLAB to simulate and evaluate the signal indicator. The camera response magnitude is normalized, and the offset spatial variance is filtered using a lowpass filter. The filtered spatial variance is then subtracted from the normalized camera response, μ_{atk} . We then compute the cross-correlation of the aligned μ_{atk} and baseline ambient acoustic noise signals. The signal indicator is simulated by holding a given ambient signal for a camera configuration as a baseline, and then passing in an input ultrasound-modulated signal.

B. Results

Ultrasound-Modulated Camera Responses. We evaluate the ultrasound vs. ambient response signal indicator using different combinations of optical zoom configurations to determine if the ultrasound modulated camera response is an intrinsic property of the optical system, or if it instead depends on the set of channel functions used. The image sensors, with their respective pixel pitch sizes in parentheses, are 12MP IMX555 (1.8 μ m) and 64MP S5KGW2 (0.8 μ m), where MP stands for megapixels, are denoted as S1, S2, respectively. The 12MP IMX555 (S1) is used for all experiments in subsection V-B. Given the variation in readout frequencies across different image sensors, and their total $M \times N$ pixel areas, random image sensor noise could potentially interfere with ultrasonic signal modulation. However, the signal indicator remains robust across the different optical zooms, at both distances as seen in Table IV, likely because the readout frequency of the image sensor compensates for image noise sources during pixel intensity modulation. While it is true that image sensors with smaller pixel pitches may experience higher levels of flicker noise [55], [56], the correlation between μ_{atk} and the baseline ambient acoustic noise signal remains distinct even at a distance of 0.28 m, suggesting that the signal modulation persists regardless of the distances tested. Given that currently available commercial ultrasonic transmitters have a range of 4 m to 11 m [42], [43], these results indicate that the threat

TABLE IV MAXIMUM CORRELATION COEFFICIENT FOR DIFFERENT OPTICAL ZOOMS AND ULTRASONIC TRANSMISSION PATTERNS

Trial	Max Coeff.	Signal In	Baseline Signal	SI
1	119	{1X,None,5cm,Sweep,Signal}	{1X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	1
2	669	{1X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	{1X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	0
3	99	{3X,None,5cm,Sweep,Signal}	{3X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	1
4	669	{3X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	{3X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	0
5	90	{12X,None,5cm,Sweep,Signal}	{12X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	1
6	669	{12X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	{12X,None,5cm,Sweep,Ambient}	0
7	578	{1X,None,28cm,Pulse,Signal}	{1X,None,28cm,Pulse,Ambient}	1
8	668	{1X,None,28cm,Pulse,Ambient}	{1X,None,28cm,Pulse,Ambient}	0

model can be effectively executed across larger image sensor areas and with smaller pixel pitches, and across different distances, but a feasibility study with real-world device localization parameters will better confirm these findings. In total 119 videos of $\approx 15 - 32s$ are analyzed, and a subset of the results are presented in Tables II and IV Increasing the exposure seems detrimental to receiving the transmitted signal as the frequency spectra of the ultrasound-modulated occluded 80 ms and 160 ms exposure time responses is similar to that of occluded ambient camera responses. This is most likely due to increased sensor irradiation clearing out the received or incoming signal.

Camera Responses from Different Speaker Directions. The results indicate that ultrasound modulated dark signals can behave as carrier waves. But it is unclear if the results would hold the same when a shorter pulse is used, or if the ultrasound modulated camera responses vary enough depending on the direction of the sound source. One way to test for this is to use a shorter pulse duration while varying the location of the sound source. A brief evaluation showed that a shorter 1.5 secs pulse produced at 0.5 cm distance from three different directions, 1) behind the device, 2) near the camera edge, and 3) in front of the device, showed that the ultrasound-modulated dark signal response could be produced from all three locations.

Ultrasonic Signal Patterns for Location Identification. Given a large enough location of interest (LOI), the adversary needs as many transmitters as there are areas to cover, where the signal attack range can be determined by the adversary as discussed in Section IV-2. The MEMS gyroscope in the device we used for our experiments is resonant at multiple ultrasonic frequencies. We evaluated two ultrasonic signal patterns without any optical stabilization configurations to validate if the ultrasonic modulated signal could differentiate enough because of the attack signal ultrasound pattern, and if that difference would reflect in the signal correlation. The ultrasonic patterns were produced by the following settings: 1) {1X,None,Pulse}, and 2){1X,None,Sweep}, which are listed as trials 1 and 7, respectively, in Table IV. The look-up table for the signal indicator may look like Table **IV**, from which the adversary can identify different locations by comparing the maximum correlation coefficients for different ultrasound transmission patterns for the same camera configurations. Based on our limited dataset, our device localization simulation accuracy is 99.9%, but it depends on the fixed ambient signal baseline prior to providing the ultrasound-modulated signal.

VII. DISCUSSION

Here we provide guidance on protecting against dark signal ultrasound-mediated device localization attacks.

No Guarantee of Privacy. This work demonstrates that blocking a smartphone camera and denying microphone access does not eliminate the risk of exploitation through an optical acoustic side channel. A key observation is that producing an ultrasound-modulated signal requires an uncovered mobile device edge near the camera, even if the front and back camera lens are occluded. Therefore, mobile devices may be protected from ultrasonic attacks by using a protective cover which encases all sides of the device. We note that the iPhone 15 Pro Max (2023) did not yield any indication of being susceptible to an ultrasonic attack for frequencies tested between 18-120 kHz, likely due to its device body material, or the location of the gyroscope within the device.

Dark Signal Optical Acoustic Side Channel. The central contribution of this paper is the discovery that an optical acoustic side channel does not require scene information to function as a threat, and can operate using low-level image sensor irradiation. We use device localization as a case study where the ultrasonic transmitter is an external device, however we observe that the ultrasonic signal can be recorded via the device microphone when microphone permissions are granted. Therefore, we note the possibility of using videos recorded on a target mobile device as sources of ultrasound signals to carry out either device localization, or attacks such as SurfingAttack on voice assistants [57]. A possible defense against these attacks would be for device manufacturers to enable noise reduction algorithms by default, ensuring that pixel intensities in unirradiated sensor images are less exploitable in such threat models.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Device Localization. The performance of our signal indicator relies on the attack sequence, i.e., collecting an ambient acoustic noise signal as baseline before activating all transmitters, and this performance is based on a simulation in MATLAB, as per the scope of this existence proof study. We use one speaker and a stationary target for our existence proof work, but a feasibility study could use a grid of ultrasonic transmitters with mobile and stationary targets. A future real world implementation can validate larger speaker-camera distances using specialized high-power speakers. Extensive previous works have shown how simply increasing the output power of speakers could effectively increase the range of acoustic interference on sensors hardware [20], [22], [50], 58. More diverse types of devices equipped with cameras besides smartphones, such as IoT home cameras, smart screens, etc., can be tested following the methodology of this work. While we collected 119 different video samples for different permutations of each channel configuration, each channel configuration is only one video, though 15-32s, and sampled at 30 fps. As such, the reliability of the signal indicator to identify a location based on the signal correlation could be further evaluated in a feasibility study. Note that MEMS gyroscopes

can wear out from prolonged ultrasound exposure, but that does not preclude multiple attack vectors which exploit them [59], [60]. Note that for all methods which target a device, the target device location is not necessarily the target device owner location, which an adversary may be more interested in than the target device location.

Dark Signal Modulation. Dark signals exist in all image sensors [15], [44], [61], and do not require anything external for generation. In a sense, the physical camera block is a filter, and its effects can also be modeled via software for an open camera. Such signal modulation can help an adversary control the optical system output using understanding of its semiconductor-level functionality, and perhaps add or remove image information, including watermarking [62], from cameras in real time even when the camera lens is not occluded. Our paper uses ultrasound as a dark signal modulation technique, but other methods for dark signal modulation may use RF, including microwave hyperthermia [63], [64], or simulating extrapolated dark signals over increased exposure times. While CMOS image sensor communication uses light [65], our dark signal approach opens possibilities to transform image sensor noise into usable information for communication by demodulating the transmitted signal.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study provides existence proof of an optical acoustic side channel that does not rely on direct or indirect scene information, and can be exploited using dark signals intrinsic to an image sensor. MEMS gyroscopes and movable lens mechanisms appear vulnerable to ultrasonic exploitation, even with occluded lenses, and such destabilization may enable device localization attack. Our findings challenge the assumption that emerging threat models must rely on advanced machine learning or deep learning techniques, which are resource intensive relative to our methodology. We found that ultrasoundmodulated signals could be observed across different optical and hybrid zoom settings, indicating that the camera response is produced by intrinsic optical system parameters, such as the rolling shutter rate and image sensor size, as confirmed by a simulation model. Future research remains to confirm the feasibility of device localization with a dark signal optical acoustic side channel attack.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors appreciate the insights and remarks from our reviewers. This work was supported in part by the National Science Foundation Industry-University Cooperative Research Centers Program under grant IUCRC-1916762, and by the Center for Hardware and Embedded System Security and Trust (CHEST) Industry Fund.

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