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Comparison of Controllers for Variable Speed Limit Using Realistic Traffic Scenarios

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Abstract—Urban motorways are designed to serve higher traffic loads but rush hours are causing periodically unstable traffic flows and congestions. Variable Speed Limit Control (VSLC) can alleviate congestion by posting appropriate speed limits on Variable Message Signs. In this paper, three controllers for VSLC are compared using a simulation model based on real traffic data obtained from the PeMS database collected at a selected motorway of the State of California, USA. The results show that the implemented VSLC controllers have the ability to improve the traffic condition in case of higher traffic intensity compared to an uncontrolled case.

Keywords— Intelligent transport systems; Traffic control; Urban motorways; Variable speed limit

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the road network in big cities is prone to everyday recurring congestion. To solve this problem many approaches are being applied, like intermodal transport, encouraging mode shift from car to public transport or non-motorized transport, building new transport infrastructure, etc. One approach is the application of solutions from the domain of Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) i.e. establishing various services so that users can optimally use the transport network. One class of services from the ITS domain are related to road traffic control and are applied to urban and rural road networks to improve the Level of Service (LoS) and reduce accidents [1].

Urban motorways serve as bypasses around larger cities or to connect suburbs with the urban areas. As such, they can be analyzed as one special type of roads. They are designed to serve greater traffic demand providing high LoS. But, areas near on- and off-ramps become critical points at which congestion appears during peak hours. If the traffic demand at the on-ramp is higher and at the same time the mainstream flow is near its capacity value (metastable flow, see [2]), disturbance in the mainstream flow occurs. Consequently, a shock wave appears and propagates upstream. Since the traffic demand is changing during the day, dynamic speed limit service from the ITS domain known as Variable Speed Limit Control (VSLC) can be used to dynamically change the speed limit values according to the current traffic (in the focus of this paper) or weather situation. The aim of such a VSLC service is to alleviate the congestion effects [3].

On urban motorways, VSLC is applied upstream of the bottleneck location (location where the congestion occurs) to directly control the mainstream inflow rate into the congested

area. Studies show that the application of VSLC can successfully alleviate traffic congestion and improve the LoS of an urban motorway regarding Travel Time (TT) [4], [5], decrease vehicle emissions [3], and increase traffic safety [4], [6].

Until now, many VSLC approaches are proposed in the literature. The aim of this paper is to compare three different controllers for VSLC. Two of them are reactive controllers. The first is called Mainline Virtual Metering (MVM) [5], and the second is called Simple Proportional Speed Control (SPSC) [7]. The third controller is based on Fuzzy Logic (FL) decision rules [8]. This comparison represents a continuation of the research started in [3]. For the sake of a more accurate comparison, the urban motorway stretch selected for simulation is modeled and calibrated using real traffic data. Calibration of the simulation model is done using real traffic data collected at a motorway of the State of California, USA [9]. Data were obtained from the Performance Measurement System (PeMS) database [10]. After the calibration of the simulation model, aforementioned VSLC controllers were adjusted to the congestion severity and traffic demand change rates. A simulation framework consisting of the microscopic traffic simulator VISSIM and MATLAB software was used to analyze VSLC controllers. The effects of the applied speed limit controllers are evaluated based on appropriately chosen Measures of Effectiveness (MoE).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the implemented VSLC controllers. Creation of traffic scenarios is explained in section 3. Section 4 describes the simulation setup, and section 5 gives the obtained simulation results including discussion about the results. Paper ends with a conclusion and description of future work.

II. CHOSEN CONTROLLERS FOR VSLC

VSLC systems are considered as a solution to solve traffic interference on urban motorways. For open-loop VSLC controllers, the traffic disturbances have to be completely known before its application. Considering the stochastic behavior of traffic demand, in most cases the prediction of traffic disturbances becomes challenging. Instead, closed-loop controllers have been widely used. They use the measured current traffic parameters to create a feedback-loop and compute the appropriate new speed limit trying to reduce the traffic congestion [11]. In continuation, the three controllers chosen for comparison are described.

1) *MVM*: This controller uses the flow-speed relationship to map desired flow value into speed limit values. It is based on the concept of ramp metering that increases the throughput of an urban motorway by limiting the on-ramp flow into the motorway mainstream flow. This mapping is done by a generalization of the ALINEA algorithm for ramp metering [4], [12] into a simple control law for VSLC. For this, the preceding motorway section is considered as an on-ramp for the next section. In this case, the ALINEA algorithm regulates the metered flow rate Q_i from motorway section $i-1$ to section i of the urban motorway as follows [5], [7]:

$$\bar{Q}_i(kT_1) = Q_i((k-1)T_1) + K_v \left[\rho_d - \frac{1}{N_{r,i}} \sum_{j \in I_{r,i}} \rho_j(kT_1) \right], \quad (1)$$

where $Q_i((k-1)T_1)$ present the flow from the previous time step, ρ_d is the desired density [veh/km/lane], $I_{r,i}$ is the set of downstream sections relevant to section i , $N_{r,i}$ is the number of sections in the set $I_{r,i}$, $K_v = 4.5$ is the controller gain and remains the same for both MVM and SPSC controllers, and ρ_j is the density of relevant downstream motorway sections in time step k regarding section i . The controller generates its outputs every T_1 s, where $T_1 = N_C T_0$. N_C is a positive integer (in this paper $N_C = 10$), and T_0 is the simulation sampling time (in this paper $T_0 = 30$ s).

New speed limit values have to be computed only if necessary which has to be detected. Let C_i denote a control variable associated to each motorway section under VSLC control. To determine whether the control variable C_i is active or not, density in the downstream section ρ_{i+1} for the particular moment kT_1 has to be measured and tested [5], [7]:

- S1 If $\rho_{i+1}(kT_1) \geq (1 + \Delta_+) \rho_c$, where Δ_+ is a positive design parameter, then C_i is active;
- S2 If $\rho_{i+1}(nk) \leq (1 + \Delta_-) \rho_c$, where Δ_- is a negative design parameter, then C_i is inactive;
- S3 If neither of the two inequalities are not satisfied, C_i maintains its status as in the previous control cycle.

The controller generates the desired speed limit \bar{V}_i for the section i using density data from the congested downstream section $i+1$. Flow commands computed using (1) have to be mapped into speed limit commands to control the traffic speed instead of the traffic flow. This is done by using the flow-speed relationship (2) as explained in [3].

$$\bar{V}_i(kT_i) = f(Q_i(kT_i)) \quad (2)$$

The speed limit $V_i(kT_i)$ in section i has to be bounded due to traffic regulations as follows: $V_{min} = 60 \leq V_i(kT_i) \leq V_{max} = 130$ km/h.

2) *SPSC*: This controller responds to the changes in downstream density instead of maintaining a fixed desired density (ρ_d) [13]. It uses the same control variables for activation as MVM. The speed limit in each motorway section is again bounded with V_{min} and V_{max} . In (3), the difference between density from the previous time step $k-1$ and current density of all affected downstream sections with respect to section i is added to the speed limit value $V_i((k-1)T_1)$ from the

previous time step [7]. Obtained result is the new speed limit value $\bar{V}_i(kT_1)$.

$$\bar{V}_i(kT_1) = V_i((k-1)T_1) + K_v \left[\sum_{i=1}^{N-1} \rho_{i+1}((k-1)T_1) - \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} \rho_{i+1}(kT_1) \right] \quad (3)$$

For both controllers, final speed limit value is checked before it is send on the VMS to ensure smooth speed limit change. The final speed limit V_i is then obtained as:

$$V_i(kT_1) = \begin{cases} V_i((k-1)T_1) - C_v, & \text{if } \bar{V}_i(kT_1) \leq V_i((k-1)T_1) - C_v \\ V_i(kT_1) + C_v, & \text{if } \bar{V}_i(kT_1) \geq V_i(kT_1) + C_v \\ \bar{V}_i(kT_1), & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}, \quad (4)$$

where C_v is a positive constant which represents the maximal allowed change of the speed limit between two consecutive control time steps (usually 10 km/h, used also in this paper) and $V_i(kT_1)$ is the final speed limit for section i [13].

3) *FL*: This controller uses fuzzy logic rules to decide about the appropriate speed limit value. The difference between the two previously mentioned controllers and this one is that in the described controllers the speed limits are determined based on pre-specified threshold values for flow, density, and average speed, while the FL controller can set the speed limit according to a combination of fuzzy rules [8]. The membership functions have to be adjusted according to the situation, which means that the membership functions differ for different analyzed periods [9]. Therefore, the rules used for the implementation of this controller are listed below. It is good to mention that the rules have different weights because one of the rules can imply the result more than another one.

1. If (Flow is low) then (Speed Limit is high) - Weight: 1;
2. If (Flow is medium) then (Speed Limit is medium) - Weight: 1;
3. If (Flow is high) then (Speed Limit is low) - Weight: 2;
4. If (Density is high) then (Speed Limit is low) - Weight: 2.

III. TRAFFIC SCENARIOS

A. Motorway section

Comparison of chosen VSLC approaches is done by using a stretch of the motorway Interstate 80 located in the State of California, USA. It is part of the District 4 (Bay Area) [9]. The chosen segment has 5 lanes, length of 7 km, 12 vehicle detectors, and originally 2 VMS and 4 on-ramps. Three on-ramps are equipped with ramp metering. The stretch is shown in Fig. 1. Each detector is located in a certain milepost according to the PeMS database providing traffic data. For comparison of the mentioned algorithms, the VMS signs are placed at the beginning of section L_1 , L_5 and L_7 . The shaded green regions represent areas under VSLC but only the middle one was active in this analysis. One has to note that vehicles decelerate before the VMS in a real-world situation, but in

the applied simulator, vehicles do not react until they pass the VMS. This phenomenon is indicated by a shift of the green region into the respective downstream section.

B. Traffic data

The PeMS database provides flow, speed, and density data across the detectors in the form of time series data collected during the day. The road segment presented in Fig. 1 was modeled in the microscopic simulator VISSIM. For this, it was necessary to select a period for an analysis. The traffic data considered the period from 00:00 to 23:59 on the first of August, 2016. The first traffic scenario is modeled according to traffic data from the morning period, while the second one described traffic during the noon period.

The morning period is from 8:00 to 11:00. The average flow is approximately 6000 veh/h. During the entire period, traffic flow has a small variation across the entire motorway stretch that can be characterized as metastable traffic flow [2]. This is an appropriate scenario for testing of the abilities of the mentioned controllers.

The noon period is composed of two hours from 12:00 to 14:00. This period is characterized by constant higher traffic flow than 7000 veh/h. The first peak is roughly 8000 veh/h at 12:30, while another one is achieved at 13:20 with the load of 7700 veh/h. During the noon period, higher demand is present most of the time and the VSLC controllers are able to make smaller improvements compared to the morning period. Therefore, this scenario is used to show how the VSLC controllers react in critical traffic situations [9].

IV. SIMULATION SETUP

In this section, the simulation framework used for controller analysis is defined, and the calibration of the modeled network is discussed.

A. Model calibration

A comparison between the data obtained from the VISSIM simulation data and the real traffic data obtained from PeMS was done to check if the simulation model can accurately represent the real traffic situation. This comparison was done by using the GEH statistic given with (5):

$$GEH = \sqrt{\frac{2(M - C)^2}{M + C}}, \quad (5)$$

where M represents hourly traffic volume from the simulated traffic model and C is the real hourly traffic data obtained from PeMS database. To achieve a good calibration, the GEH value should be less than 5 for more than 85% of the individual links.

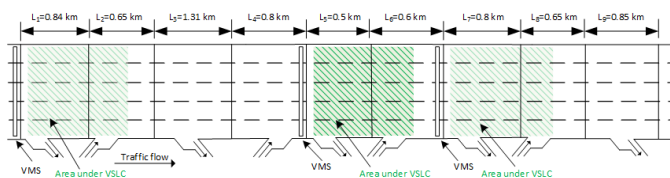


Figure 1. Modeled motorway stretch consisting of 9 segments

The GEH values between (5 and 10) indicate some deviations between real traffic data and data obtained from the simulation. The obtained result for the morning period is 5.6 on average and for the noon period, GEH is 4.3. For the morning period, an additional check was done and there were no significant deviations. Therefore, the simulation models can be accepted.

B. Simulation parameters

Simulation framework contains VISSIM microscopic simulator and programming platform MATLAB [3]. Realistic driver behaviors for motorway stretch including the area around on- and off-ramps are tuned based on [14] where a calibrating process for VISSIM used to simulate the traffic flow on German motorways is explained. Acceleration rate is set to 1.5 m/s^2 , while headway is set to be 3 s. The other parameters used in this analysis can be found in [9]. The simulated traffic flow is composed of 98% passenger cars and 2% of heavy vehicles.

V. OBTAINED RESULTS

Chosen MoEs for the comparative analysis are TT and Total Time Spend (TTS). TT is a simple measure that measures the time one vehicle needs to travel through an observed motorway stretch and is related to mainstream traffic only. TTS represents the amount of time spent by all of the vehicles on the motorway including on- and off-ramps.

A. Morning period

The quantitative analysis regarding the TT, TTS, delay and queue length obtained during this period is shown in Table I. Regarding the traffic parameters, two of the controllers reacted correctly (MVM and FL) reducing the average values compared to the non-control case. The MVM and FL controllers resulted in improvements in all of the measured MoE, except in values for average delay, which was increased for the MVM case. The SPSC controller did not show significant improvements and had only a minor impact on improvements in the queue length. It is also possible to state that the reason for poor results of SPSC is the fact that its output speed limit can oscillate, causing unstable traffic conditions.

B. Noon period

The results obtained for this period can be seen in Table II. Despite the problem with congestion during the noon period, the controllers have been able to reduce almost all of the compared parameters in this case. Reduction of TTS has been achieved for all controllers where SPSC reduction is 0.6%, the MVM 4% and in case of FL, the improvement is 3.9%. The fact that the improvements are not significant, proves that the controllers, when are applied to a congested period, have a limited impact [9].

C. Discussion

The working principle of the compared VSLC controllers is essentially based on the timely detection of congestion (increased density) in the traffic flow and taking a preventive action by changing the speed limit. All aimed towards keeping

TABLE I. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS FOR THE MORNING PERIOD

	No VSLC	SPSC		MVM		FL	
		Obtained	Reduction [%]	Obtained	Reduction [%]	Obtained	Reduction [%]
<i>TTS</i> [veh-h]	16415.1	16367.8	0.3	14396.0	12.3	15760.8	4.0
Average <i>TT</i> [s]	419.7	425.5	-1.4	403.3	3.9	357.7	14.8
Maximal <i>TT</i> [s]	2908.5	3312.0	-13.9	1654.4	43.1	1680.1	42.2
Average delay [s]	146.7	163.5	-11.4	189.5	-29.2	108.2	26.3
Maximum delay [s]	2615.3	3005.7	-14.9	1371.4	47.6	1483.7	43.3
Average queue length [veh]	1.6	0.4	76.8	0.2	87.4	1.2	21.6
Maximal queue length [veh]	5.0	4.0	20.0	3.0	40.0	4.0	20.0

TABLE II. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS FOR THE NOON PERIOD

	No VSLC	SPSC		MVM		FL	
		Obtained	Reduction [%]	Obtained	Reduction [%]	Obtained	Reduction [%]
<i>TTS</i> [veh-h]	11439.0	11372.5	0.6	10986.6	4.0	10996.1	3.9
Average <i>TT</i> [s]	622.6	621.7	0.1	617.3	0.9	598.5	3.9
Maximal <i>TT</i> [s]	1563.3	1534.9	1.8	1489.0	4.8	1889.7	-20.9
Average delay [s]	502.9	504.3	-0.3	474.0	5.7	489.3	2.7
Maximum delay [s]	1512.0	1503.6	0.6	1489.0	1.5	1356.0	11.0
Average queue length [veh]	2.3	2.3	0	2.1	10.9	1.25	45.7
Maximal queue length [veh]	20	23	-15	23	-15	20	0

the traffic parameters within acceptable values. By applying VSLC, the MoEs were maintained within acceptable limits during the morning and noon period. In the case without VSLC, most MoE measures in the motorway stretch slightly exceed the values obtained by applying VSLC. There was also a significant reduction of the queue length at on-ramps when VSLC was applied.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Three reactive VSLC controllers MVM, SPSC, and FL have been applied in a microscopic simulation environment. Comparative analysis is conducted on a motorway stretch that was calibrated using real traffic data obtained from the PeMS database. Results show that VSLC controllers improve the traffic-related MoEs compared to the no-control case.

Future work on this topic will include an augmentation of the simulation framework that will enable simulation of different compliance rates of drivers to the imposed speed limit. Additionally, optimization of rules for the FL controller by applying an optimization method based on the genetic algorithm will be developed and evaluated.

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