Federated learning-powered visual object detection for safety monitoring

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Abstract
Visual object detection is an important artificial intelligence (AI) technique for safety monitoring applications. Current approaches for building visual object detection models require large and well-labeled dataset stored by a centralized entity. This not only poses privacy concerns under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but also incurs large transmission and storage overhead. Federated learning (FL) is a promising machine learning paradigm to address these challenges. In this paper, we report on FedVision—a machine learning engineering platform to support the development of federated learning powered computer vision applications—to bridge this important gap. The platform has been deployed through collaboration between WeBank and Extreme Vision to help customers develop computer vision-based safety monitoring solutions in smart city applications. Through actual usage, it has demonstrated significant efficiency improvement and cost reduction while fulfilling privacy-preservation requirements (e.g., reducing communication overhead for one company by 50 fold and saving close to 40,000RMB of network cost per annum). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first practical application of FL in computer vision-based tasks.

INTRODUCTION

Visual object detection is one of the most important artificial intelligence (AI) techniques with wide applications in safety monitoring. As deep learning techniques advances, visual object detection has also witnessed significant development in recent years (Redmon and Farhadi 2018; Ren et al. 2017; Zhao et al. 2018). The current visual object detection model training approach requires centralized storage of training data (Figure 1). Under such an approach, each user annotates visual data from locally owned cameras and uploads these labeled training data to a central server (e.g., a cloud server). Data storage and model training both take place in the server.

Under such a machine learning paradigm, the users have no control over how the data would be used once they are transmitted to the central database, which makes them vulnerable to privacy breach. Besides, it is also difficult to share data across organizations due to liability concerns, which are made even more pronounced by data privacy protection regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Voigt and Bussche 2017). The typically amount of data required to train a useful visual object detector also means that significant communication cost is incurred when transmitting training data from their sources to the server.

These challenges have motivated the AI research community to seek new paradigms of training machine learning models. Federated Learning (FL) (Kairouz et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2019) is one promising paradigm. Under FL, machine learning models are trained from distributed datasets without requiring data to leave their sources.
Such an approach fundamentally limits data privacy leakage and communication overhead, balancing performance and efficiency issues while preventing sensitive data from being disclosed. FL models are trained through model aggregation rather than data aggregation. Under such a paradigm, we can train a visual object detection model locally at a data owner’s site, and upload the model parameters to a central server for aggregation.

However, realizing this vision requires an easy-to-use tool to enable developers who are not experts in federated learning to conveniently leverage this technology to develop computer vision applications. Such a tool is not yet available. In order to bridge this gap, we propose FedVision (Liu et al. 2020). It is a machine learning engineering platform which supports easy development of FL-powered computer vision applications. The current version of FedVision supports a proprietary federated visual object detection algorithm framework based on YOLOv3 (Redmon and Farhadi 2018) – FedYOLOv3. It allows end-to-end collaborative training of FedYOLOv3 with locally stored datasets from multiple clients in a user-friendly manner.

The platform was deployed through collaboration between WeBank and Extreme Vision in May 2019. So far, it has been adopted by three large-scale corporate customers to develop visual object detection applications for safety monitoring. Through actual usage, the platform has helped the customers significantly improve their operational efficiency and reduce their costs, while eliminating the need to transmit sensitive data around (e.g., reducing communication overhead for one company by 50 fold and saving close to 40,000 RMB of network cost per annum). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first industry application of federated learning in computer vision-based tasks.

SYSTEM DESIGN

Under FedVision, training a visual object detection model consists of three main steps: (1) crowdsourcing image annotations, (2) federated model training, and (3) federated model update. In this section, we describe the design of these steps in detail.

Crowdsourcing image annotations

FedVision adopts the Darknet model format for annotation. Under this format, each bounding box is specified as [label x y w h], where “label” denotes the category of objects, (x, y) represents the center of the bounding box, and (w, h) represents the width and height of the bounding box. This module provides data owners with a tool to easily label their locally stored image data for FL model training (Figure 2). Through the image annotation tool, a user can easily specify bounding boxes and the corresponding labels.

Anyone capable of visually identify where the objects of interest (e.g., flames) are in a given image can use the mouse to draw the bounding box, and assign it to a category/label. Users are not required to be familiar with federated learning. With this tool, the task of labeling training data can be distributed among data owners in a way similar to crowdsourcing (Doan, Ramakrishnan, and Halevy 2011), thereby, making it flexible to involve additional manpower in order to spread out the burden of image annotation. It also supports online learning with new image data arrive sequentially over time from the cameras.

Federated model training

The federated model training framework under FedVision is a variant of horizontal federated learning (HFL) (Yang et al. 2019). HFL, also known as sample-based federated learning, is designed for scenarios in which datasets have significant overlap in the feature space, but little overlap in the sample space (Figure 3). HFL is suitable for the application scenario of FedVision since it helps multiple data owners with data from the
same feature space (i.e. labeled image data) to jointly train
federated object detection models. The term “horizontal”
comes from “horizontal partition”, which is widely used to
describe the traditional tabular view of a database (i.e. rows
of a table are horizontally partitioned into different groups
and each row contains the complete set of data features).

Under HFL, data collected and stored by each party are
no longer required to be uploaded to a common server to
facilitate model training. Instead, the model framework
is sent from the federated learning server to each party,
which then uses the locally stored data to train this model.
After training converges, the encrypted model parameters
from each party are sent back to the server. They are then
aggregated into a global model. This global model will
eventually be distributed to the FL participants to be used
for inference tasks.

From a system architecture perspective, the federated
model training module consists of the following six com-
ponents as shown in Figure 4:

**Configuration:** which allows users to configure model
training by specifying the number of iterations, the
number of reconnections, the server URL for
uploading model parameters, and other key param-
ters.

**Task Scheduler:** which performs global dispatch
scheduling to coordinate communications between
the federated learning server and the clients in
order to balance the utilization of local computational
resources during the federated model
training process. The load-balancing approach is
based on (Yu et al. 2017) which jointly considers
clients’ local model quality and the current load
on their local computational resources in an effort
to maximize the quality of the resulting federated
model.

**Task Manager:** which coordinates the concurrent fed-
erated model training processes when multiple
model algorithms are being trained concurrently by
the FL clients.

**Explorer:** which monitors the resource utilization sit-
uation on the client side (e.g., CPU usage, memory
usage, network load, etc.), so as to inform the Task
Scheduler on its load-balancing decisions.

**FL_SERVER:** which is responsible for model param-
eter uploading, model aggregation and model dis-
patch, which are essential steps involved in feder-
ated learning (Bonawitz et al. 2019).

**FL_CLIENT:** which hosts the Task Manager and
Explorer components and performs local model
training, which is also an essential step involved in
federated learning (Bonawitz et al. 2019).
As the application scenarios for FedVision places more emphasis on efficiency over performance, we adopt a one-stage approach YOLOv3 (Redmon and Farhadi 2018) as the basic object detection model. The approach of YOLOv3 can be summarized as follows. Given an image (e.g., Figure 5), it is first divided into an $S \times S$ grid with each grid square used for detecting the target object with its center located in that grid square (i.e. the blue square grid in Figure 5 is used to detect flames).

For each grid square, YOLOv3 predicts the positions of the bounding boxes, estimates the confidence score for the predicted bounding boxes, and computes the class conditional probability. The loss function of YOLOv3 consists of three parts: (1) class prediction loss, (2) bounding box coordinate prediction loss, and (3) confidence score prediction loss.

We implement a federated learning version of it—Federated YOLOv3 (FedYOLOv3)—in our platform. With one round of end-to-end training, FedYOLOv3 can identify the position of the bounding box as well as the class for the target object in an image.

After the users have labeled their local training datasets with the FedVision image annotation tool, they can join the FedYOLOv3 model training process. Once the local model converges, a user can initiate the transfer of the current local model parameters (in the form of a weight matrix) to the FL_SERVER in a secure encrypted manner through his FL_CLIENT. The HFL module in FedVision operates in rounds. After each round of learning elapses, FL_SERVER performs federated averaging (McMahan et al. 2016) to compute an updated global weight matrix for the model. The FL_SERVER then sends the updated
weight matrix to the participating FL_CLIENTs so that they can enjoy the benefits of an updated object detection model trained with everyone’s dataset in essence. Multiple rounds of FL model training can be monitored in the FedVision tool user interface as shown in Figure 6.

**FEDERATED MODEL UPDATE**

After local model training, the model parameters from each user are transmitted to the FL_SERVER by the respective FL_CLIENT. The updated model parameters need to be stored for tracing purposes. Over time, the storage size required for these parameter files increases with the rounds of FL model training. FedVision adopts Cloud Object Storage (COS) to address the problem of dynamic changes in the required storage space.

Transmitting model parameters from FL-CLIENTs to the FL_SERVER can be time consuming due to network bandwidth constraints. During the federated model training, different model parameters might have different contributions towards final model performance. Thus, neural network compression can be performed to reduce the sizes of the transmitted model parameters by pruning less useful weight values while preserving model performance (Bengio and LeCun 2016; Cheng et al. 2017). In FedVision, we apply network pruning to compress the federated model parameters and speed up transmission.

Let $M^{i,k}$ be the model parameter matrix from the $i$-th user after completing the $k$-th iteration of federated model training. Let $M^{i,k}_j$ be the $j$-th layer of $M^{i,k}$. We denote the sum of the absolute values of all parameters in the $j$-th layer as $|\sum M^{i,k}_j|$. The contribution of the $j$-th layer to the overall model performance, $v(j)$, can be expressed as:

$$v(j) = |\sum M^{i,k}_j - \sum M^{i,(k-1)}_j|.$$ The larger the value of $v(j)$, the greater the impact of layer $j$ on the performance of the final model. FL_CLIENT ranks the $v(j)$ values of all layers in the model in descending order, and selects only the parameters of the first $n$ layers to be uploaded to the FL_SERVER for federated model aggregation. A user can set the desired value for $n$ through FedVision. A video demonstration of the functionalities of the FedVision platform can be accessed online.  

**Impact**

FedVision has been deployment through collaboration between Extreme Vision and WeBank since May 2019. It is currently serving three large-scale corporate customers: 1) China Resources (CRC), 2) GRG Banking, 3) State Power Investment Corporation (SPIC). CRC has business interests in consumer products, healthcare, energy services, urban construction and operation, technology and finance. It has more than 420,000 employees. FedVision has been used to help it detect multiple types of safety hazards via cameras in more than 100 factories. GRG Banking is a globally renowned AI solution provider in financial self-service industry in the world. It has more than 300,000 equipment (e.g., ATMs) deployed in over 80 countries. FedVision has been used to help it monitor suspicious transaction behaviors via cameras on the equipment. SPIC is the world’s largest photovoltaic power generation company which facilities in 43 countries. FedVision has been used to help it monitor the safety of more than 10,000 square meters of photovoltaic panels.

The overview of FedVision deployment with these three customers is illustrated in Figure 7. The Federated
AI Technology Enabler (FATE) framework developed by WeBank is deployed through the Extreme Vision platform. It serves as the FL_SERVER. Each customer executes an FL_CLIENT under FedVision. Model parameter updates are transmitted between the FL_SERVER and the FL_CLIENTs in a secure manner. By adopting FedVision, the customers have achieved the following business improvements:

**Efficiency:** in the flame identification system of CRC, to improve a model, at least 1,000 sample images were needed. The entire procedure generally required five labellers for about 2 weeks, including the time of testing and packaging. As the sample images are not sufficient in practice, labeller spent a lot of time not only labeling but also waiting for the data. Thus, the total time for model optimization can be up to 30 days. In subsequent operations, the procedure would be repeated. With FedVision, the system administrator can finish labeling the images by himself. The time of model optimization is reduced by more than 20 days, saving labor cost. As data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that the average annual salary for information transmission, software and information technology services is 161,352 RMB, thus...
each of our systems save more than 10,000 RMB per operation.

Data Privacy: under FedVision, image data do not need to leave the machine with which they are collected to facilitate model training. In the case of GRGBanking, 10,000 photos were required to train its model. Each photo is around 1 MB in size. The 10,000 photos used to require 2 to 3 days to be collected and downloaded to a central location. During this process, the data would go through two to three locations and are at risk of being exposed. With the help of FedVision, GRGBanking can leverage the local storage and computational resources at their ATM equipment to train a federated suspicious activity detection model, thereby reducing the risk of data exposure.

Cost-Saving: in the generator monitoring system of SPIC, a total of 100 channels of surveillance videos are in place in one generator facility. Under the data transmission rate of 512 KB/s for synchronous algorithm analysis and optimization, these 100 channels require at least 50 MB/sec of network bandwidth if image data need to be sent. This is expensive to implement on an industry scale. With FedVision, the network bandwidth required for model update is significantly reduced to less than 1 MB/s. This reduces communication overhead by 50 fold. Taking Tencent Cloud as an example (Figure 8), it used to cost more than 40,000 RMB per year. With FedVision, SPIC just need to spend less than 200 RMB per year for this.

The improvements brought about by the FedVision platform has significantly enhanced the operations of the customers and provided them with competitive business advantages.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we report on our experience addressing the challenges of building effective visual object detection models in a privacy-preserving and efficient manner through federated learning. The deployed FedVision platform is an end-to-end machine learning engineering platform for supporting easy development of FL-powered computer vision applications. The platform has been used by three large-scale corporate customers to develop computer vision-based safety hazard warning solutions in smart city applications. It has helped the customers improve their operational efficiency, achieve data privacy protection, and reduced cost significantly. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first industry application of federated learning in computer vision-based tasks.

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ENDNOTES

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