

IMPROVED OCR QUALITY FOR SMART SCANNED DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

*Phan Viet Anh¹, Nguyen Duy Tung Khanh¹,
Tran Manh Dat¹, Pham Van Dan¹*

Abstract

The quality of the document images is a crucial factor for the performance of an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) model. Various issues from the input data hinder the recognition success such as heterogeneous layouts, skewness and proportional fonts. This paper investigated several algorithms for data pre-processing including image deskewing, table and document layout analysis to improve the accuracy of the OCR model and then built an end-to-end scanned document management system. We verified the algorithms using a well-known OCR software namely Tesseract. The experiments on a real dataset shown that our methods can accurately process document images with arbitrary angles of rotation, and different layouts. As a result, the accuracy by words of Tesseract can boost 23% for documents with complex structures. The quality of the output text allows to build a system to store and search documents efficiently.

Index terms

Optical Character Recognition (OCR); Table Recognition; Image Deskewing; Document Layout Analysis

1. Introduction

Optical character recognition (OCR) is converting images of documents of typed, handwritten or scanned text into machine-encoded text. OCR systems have been widely used in many practical applications such as invoice management [1], [2], CAPTCHA recognition [3], [4], building digital libraries [5], [6], and number plate recognition [7], [8]. The high quality of input data is one of the key factors to improve the recognition performance and thus affects the applicability of OCR systems.

Building an accurate OCR engine is a challenging problem. Many issues related to the input images that hinder OCR systems from achieving a high character recognition rate [9]. For example, noises, different font sizes and types, and skewing lead to errors in separating characters [10], [11]. Thus, the character-based algorithms can not work well. Moreover, heterogeneous layouts of documents containing tables, columns will degrade

¹Le Quy Don Technical University

the performance of encoder-decoder based deep neural networks, e.g. Tesseract, that recognize the whole lines of text [12].

This paper aims to enhance the accuracy of OCR engines by pre-processing input data and build a searchable system for electronic documents. Our work focuses on processing several document types that are commonly appeared in the business work of government departments in Vietnam. Based on data observation, we have found that most of documents have high resolution and clean background so no contrast enhancement and background subtraction methods are needed. We developed the pre-processing techniques including image deskewing, table recognition, and document layout analysis. Applying the techniques will provide the input with quality sufficient enough for the OCR engine. The experiments on a real dataset of electronic documents shown that our pre-processing techniques can boost the accuracy of the OCR engine significantly. For application purpose, we built a system for storing, indexing and searching scanned documents to support the operation work of some agencies and organizations in Vietnam.

In summary, this paper makes the following contributions:

- Applying three pre-processing techniques to enhance the accuracy of OCR engines.
- Building an electronic document management system (eDMS) to promote the business work of companies and agencies.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 surveys studies related to pre-processing techniques for OCR engines. The proposed methods are described in Section 3. Section 4 presents the dataset, measurement and experimental results with discussions. Section 5 concludes our work and findings.

2. Related work

Converting document images to text has a wide range of real applications such as recognition and information extraction for business documents (passports, invoices, and bank statements) [13], [14]. Although various efforts to improve OCR performance, there is no universal solution for all electronic document types with different quality such as blurred, skewed, rotated, and complex structures [15]. In [16], Shen et al. tried to separate objects from the background. The purpose is to remove image background before feeding into the OCR engine. This helps to reduce noises in input images and hence improve the OCR performance. Following noise reduction approaches, Ye et al. proposed a method for text identification in images and video frames based on Support Vector Machines (SVMs) [17]. This method can process images with complex background to only extract text. Similarly, Shivananda et al. presented a hybrid model for separating text from the complex background [18]. The model combines connected components analysis and an unsupervised thresholding.

According to each kind of documents, many solutions have been investigated to obtain a high recognition rate. Brisinello et al. applied four different preprocessing methods to boost Tesseract's performance on images with low quality, low resolution and colorful

background [19]. In [20], Bhagvati et al. introduced some important factors to help OCR system achieve high accuracy on Telugu and other Indian scripts. The factors were determined based on the characteristics of these characters.

For documents containing tables, Naganjaneyulu et al. proposed a heuristic-based table detection algorithm using hough lines and harris corner [21]. The main drawback of this algorithm is time-consuming. Shafait et al. used components of the layout analysis module of Tesseract to locate tables in documents [22]. This work only focuses on locating tables in document images, does not reconstruct the table structures in the output.

Recently, many researchers have applied deep learning-based methods for table detection and reconstruction. To locate tables, Gilani et al. used a region proposal network followed by a fully connected neural network [23]; Qasim et al. proposed a graph network [24]. Schreiber et al. [25] detected tables using Faster R-CNN [26] and semantic segmentation [27] for structure analysis. In [28], Paliwal et al. presented an end-to-end model for both table detection and structure analysis. The main drawback of deep learning-based methods is the need of a large amount of labeled data and computational time.

This work aims to process document images that may be rotated, skewed and contain tables. For rotated images, Hough transformation [29] is adopted to adjust the document orientation. For documents with tables, we need to perform two tasks including table detection and structure analysis. The details of our proposed methods will be presented in the next section.

3. Proposed methods

This section will describe our methods for input data normalization to improve accuracy of OCR engines. Generating accurate text is an important factor to leverage OCR model to practical applications. The data were collected from several companies and agencies. After observing, we have found that the scanned documents have different quality and can not feed directly to the recognition system. To address the main issues, we investigated the pre-processing techniques including image deskewing, table and layout analysis. Figure 1 shows the flow to combine such techniques to normalize the input images.

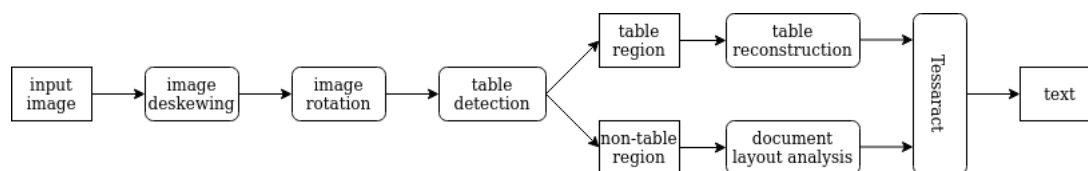


Fig. 1. The pipeline of the text recognition system with input data pre-processing.

3.1. Image deskewing

3.1.1. Image deskewing: Scanned documents usually skewed because they were not placed correctly on a flatbed scanner. This seriously affects the accuracy and speed of the OCR. Therefore, detecting and correcting the skew of scanned images are one of the crucial parts in OCR systems. This process is called image deskewing. To deskew scanned documents, we apply the Hough transform algorithm [29] to locate text lines in the images. This can be achieved by selecting appropriate parameters and filtering redundant lines. After that, we estimate the skew angle and make a rotation to align the document with four corners of the image. Figure 11 describes the entire scanned image deskewing process as mentioned above.

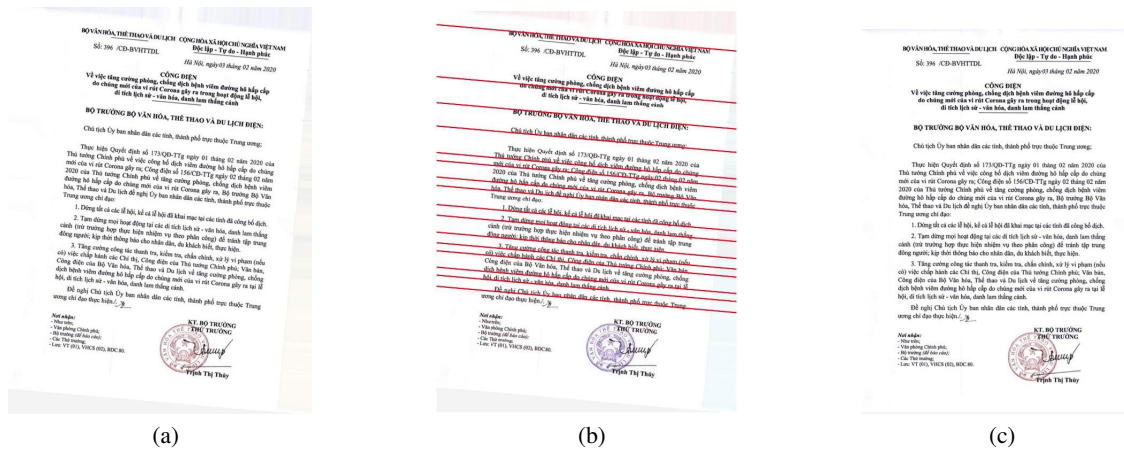


Fig. 2. Image deskewing process: (a) Input image, (b) Text lines detection using Hough transform, and (c) Output image

3.1.2. Page orientation correction: After rotating by the angle of text lines, the page orientation may be upright or upside down. The orientation now is estimated using algorithms in [30] and then we adjust the page to the correct position.

3.2. Table analysis

The purpose is to extract table components in the document to recognize separately and reconstruct in the output file. For encoder-decoder based OCR models that encode and generate the whole text lines instead of single characters, the scanned documents containing tables make a high error rate. The reason is that a line may contain text fragments of different cells and a cell may have some segments of text lines. This makes the decoder difficult to predict the output text and arrange the content. To address the issue, we extract sub images of each single cell to feed into the recognition model.

The steps to split a table into cells includes 1) locating the table, 2) finding cell vertices, and 3) determining the table structure. The rest of this section will describe more details about our method.

3.2.1. Table detection: To locate, we detect all lines in the images and then predict the set of lines that may form the table. Table lines are filtered by using image morphology operators [31] with appropriate structuring elements. This method is selected because tables are composed by vertical lines and horizontal lines. To apply the operators, we used dilation to highlight both vertical and horizontal lines in the image. Figure 3 illustrates using the dilation operator and a structuring element to emphasize vertical lines on an image. $B_{w,h}$ denotes the structuring element named B with the width and height of w and h respectively. In Figure 3, w is 1 and h is 3. The red point in B shows the origin of the structuring element. It can be seen that the dilation image has grown upwards and downwards compared to A . Additionally, the bigger h , the longer the vertical lines are. We use the structuring element with the width greater than the high for horizontal line detection and the width smaller than the high for vertical line detection. An example of table detection is shown in Figure 4.

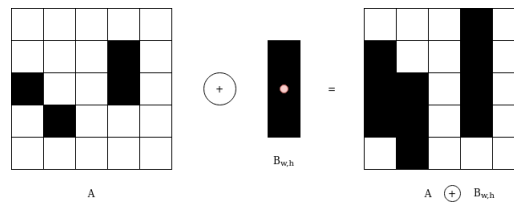


Fig. 3. Dilation of image A by structuring element B

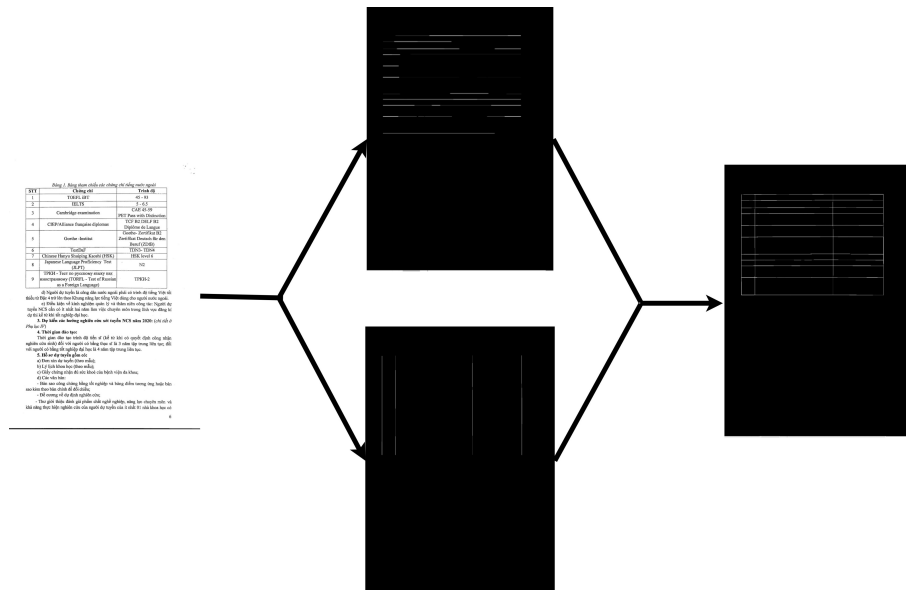


Fig. 4. Table detection using image morphology

3.2.2. Cell extraction and table construction: After locating tables, sub regions of cells are extracted. A table may have heterogeneous structures in which a cell may be the result of merging several cells. Thus we need to analyze the table structure to feed each single cell into the recognition engine, then output the texts into the similar

format. The table analysis process has three main steps including 1) finding bounding rectangles, 2) merging cell corners, and 3) line alignment among cells.

Bounding rectangles. *Canny* algorithm [32] is applied to filter the edges in the table region. We find the inner contours and consider the bounding rectangle of each contour as a cell. Figure 5 shows an example of cell extraction for a table. We denote S as the set of the rectangle vertices.

$$S = v_{i,j}, i = \overline{1, n} \text{ and } j = \overline{1, 4} \quad (1)$$

where n is the number of cells and $v_{i,j}$ denotes the j^{th} vertex of the i^{th} cell. These vertices are used to construct the table layout for the output text.

STT	Chứng chỉ	Trình độ
1	TOEFL iBT	45 - 93
2	IELTS	5 - 6.5
3	Cambridge examination	CAE 45-59 PET Pass with Distinction
4	CIEP/Alliance française diplomas	TCF B2 DELF B2 Diplôme de Langue
5	Goethe -Institut	Goethe- Zertifikat B2 Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf (ZDfB)
6	TestDaF	TDN3- TDN4
7	Chinese Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)	HSK level 6
8	Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT)	N2
9	ТРКИ - Тест по русскому языку как иностранному (TORFL - Test of Russian as a Foreign Language)	ТРКИ-2

Fig. 5. Table cells detection

Merging cell corners. The vertex set S is reduced by merging points at each corner. Because cells are bounded by the inner rectangles (Figure 5), the corner points of adjacent cells are not identical. To merge such points, we first compute the Euclid distance among elements in S . Then, the vertices having the distances less than a threshold Δd are considered to belong to the same position. Δd is estimated according to the gap of text lines at image deskewing stage. Figure 6 illustrates the vertex merging process, where the vertices in the dashed circles are merged.

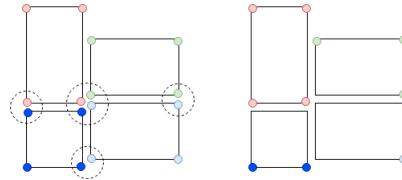


Fig. 6. Vertex merge process.

Line alignment among cells. After vertex merging, we determine all vertical and horizontal lines of the tables based on the cell vertex coordinates as in Figure 7.

Algorithm 1 presents the steps to construct the table from the vertex set. Starting points of vertical lines are called top anchor vertices and highlighted in red in Figure 7. Similarly, left anchor vertices are the starting points of horizontal lines, highlighted in green. The Algorithm 1 takes the vertex set as the input and find all top anchor and left anchor vertices. This process is illustrated in Figure 7. As described in Algorithm 1, the x coordinate of a vertex is ignored if its distance along x axis to any left anchor vertex is less than the threshold Δt_x . Similarly, we use the threshold Δt_y to remove non-top anchors. Δt_x and Δt_y are estimated from the gap of text lines and shared the same value. The algorithm starts from a top-left vertex, and collects all top and left anchors.

Algorithm 1 Table reconstruction

INPUT: Vertices set $V = v_1, v_2 \dots v_N$, V_m is top-left vertex

OUTPUT: Top anchor vertices set V_x , left anchor vertices set V_y

Initialize anchor vertices: $V_x = \{V_m\}$, $V_y = \{V_m\}$

for V_i in V **do**

for V_j in V_x **do**

if $\|V_{jx} - V_{ix}\| < \Delta t_x$ **then**
 continue

else

$V_x = V_x \cup \{V_i\}$

end if

end for

for V_k in V_y **do**

if $\|V_{ky} - V_{iy}\| < \Delta t_y$ **then**
 continue

else

$V_y = V_y \cup \{V_i\}$

end if

end for

end for

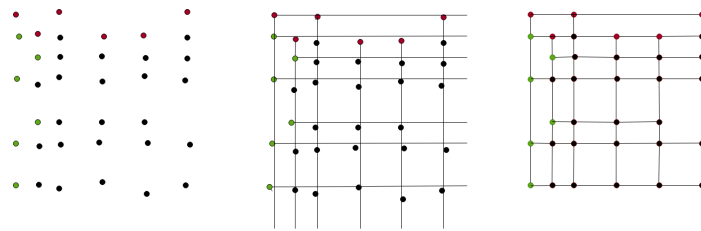


Fig. 7. Table reconstruction

Finally, the exact structure of the table is determined. We create a set of table lines by connecting all top anchor and left anchor vertices. Given any point in the vertex set,

STT	Chứng chỉ	Trình độ
1	TOEFL iBT	45 - 93
2	IELTS	5 - 6.5
3	Cambridge examination	CAE 45-59 PET Pass with Distinction
4	CIEP/Alliance française diplomas	TCF B2, DELF B2 Diplôme de Langue
5	Goethe -Institut	Goethe- Zertifikat B2 Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf (ZDfB)
6	TestDaF	TDN3- TDN4
7	Chinese Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)	HSK level 6
8	Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT)	N2
9	ТРКИ - Тест по русскому языку как иностранному (TORFL - Test of Russian as a Foreign Language)	ТРКИ-2

Fig. 8. Table construction result

based on the distance to these lines, we can find the line that the vertex belongs to. After this step, the region of each single cell is identified. The sub image corresponding with this region is fed into OCR engine to recognize the text in the cell. Figure 8 shows the result of table analysis.

3.3. Document Layout Analysis

The purpose of this step is to separate a document into paragraphs and a paragraph into text lines. We use *X-Y Cut* algorithm [33] that applies on the projection of the number of black pixels (in the case of white paper backgrounds) on the X and Y axes to split the components in the image. An example of the projection is shown in Figure 9. The separation based on the projection is illustrated in Figure 10.



Fig. 9. The projection of image on X and Y axis

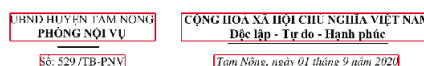


Fig. 10. Components separated based on the XY-cut algorithm

4. Experiments

4.1. Dataset

The dataset consists of 120 scanned images of Vietnamese documents dividing into two groups in which one contains tables (40 images) and one does not contain tables (80 images). Such two groups are called Table and Non-Table sets. We use the results on the documents containing tables to verify the quality of the table analysis method. The results on documents without tables are used to verify image deskewing, and layout analysis algorithms.

4.2. Evaluation Measures and Experimental Setting

To evaluate the performance of the methods, we use the measures of text similarity, and word error rate (WER) to estimate the distance between the ground truth and the predicted texts. To obtain the ground truth texts, we compared each scanned document and its OCR output to correct the errors.

The similarity of two texts is computed by difflib library¹. Given two text T_1 and T_2 , we find all matching blocks in which each block is defined as the form (i, j, n) such that $T_1[i : i + n] == T_2[j : j + n]$. The Similarity measure then is computed as follows:

$$Similarity = \frac{2 \times \sum_{i=1}^K |s_i|}{|T_1| + |T_2|} \quad (2)$$

where K is the number of the matching blocks and $|s|$ denotes the length of the sequence s .

Our preprocessing methods are verified using Tesseract 4.0 that enables line recognition using LSTM networks. The experiments are to compare our preprocessing methods with those of Tesseract.

4.3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 compares the OCR accuracy according to the Similarity and WER in two cases with and without applying our proposed methods (eDMS) for Tesseract on Table dataset. For this dataset, we applied all the techniques including deskew, table and layout analysis. Our preprocessing methods improve Tesseract significantly. Specifically, the Similarity score is enhanced 0.23, and WER is reduced 23%. Figures 12 and 13 show the Similarity and WER for each document. As can be seen, our methods boost the accuracy of all the documents according to both Similarity and WER. Specially, several documents are unable to process by Tesseract resulting in very low performance, e.g. the third and twentieth documents. By applying our methods, Tesseract can recognize accurately.

¹<https://docs.python.org/3/library/difflib.html>

To verify the deskew algorithm, we rotated the documents with different angles and try the recognition engine. Figures 14 and 15 shows Similarity and WER with different angles for two scenarios with and without application our deskew algorithm. It should be noted that our method can detect any rotated angle while Tesseract (which has also included image rotation as a preprocessing method) only works with angles around 0° and 270° ($\pm 4^\circ$).

We also compared our deskew algorithm with that in Tesseract. Figure 11 shows an example in which our method is more efficient.

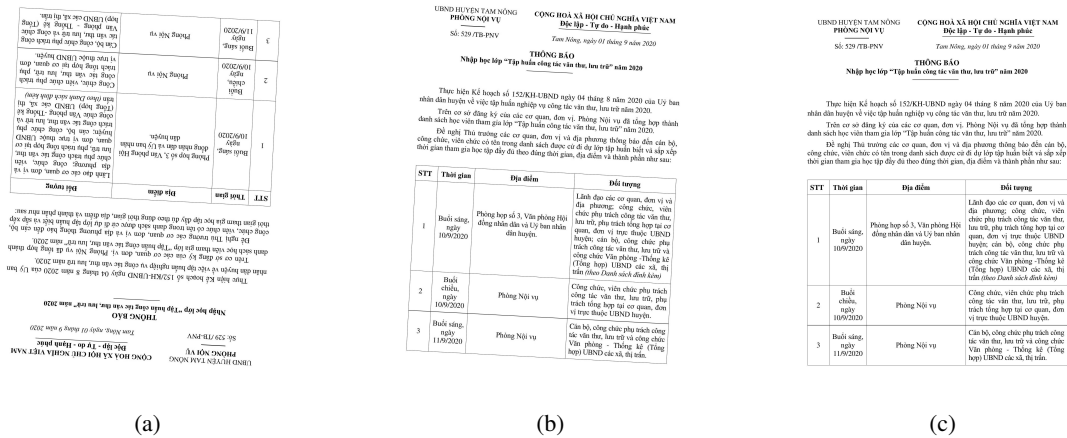


Fig. 11. Image deskewing (a) Input image, (b) Deskew method in Tesseract, and (c) Proposed deskew method

To sum up, preprocessing data is essential for OCR engine to process non-standard input. This work present several techniques including deskew, table and layout analysis. These techniques are beneficial for Tesseract, a text line-based OCR recognition to process the several type of documents.

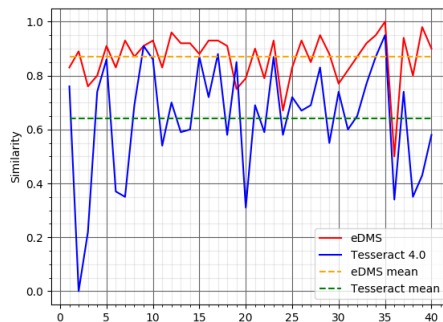


Fig. 12. Similarity on 40 images of Table dataset

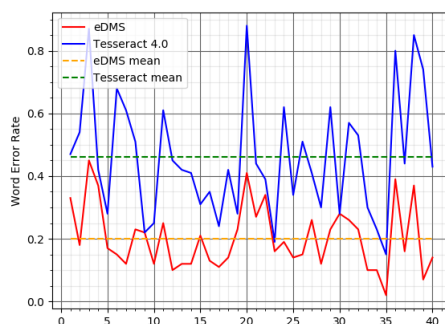


Fig. 13. WER on 40 images of Table dataset

Table 1. The performance of our proposed methods on the Table dataset

Measure	Tesseract 4.0	eDMS
similarity	0.64 ± 0.21	0.87 ± 0.09
WER	0.46 ± 0.19	0.2 ± 0.1

Error analysis. We observed the results and analyzed the characteristics of input images that our preprocessing methods are unable to correct. Figure 16 shows the failure cases including (a) containing seals, (b) mixing printed and handwritten characters, (c) containing noise lines causing by the scan process, and (d) blur table lines.

4.4. A smart scanned document management system

After obtaining the correct contents, we build a management system that enables to store and search scanned documents by text conveniently. This system is beneficial to the business work of various agencies and organizations where they archive a huge amount of paper documents. As an example, we surveyed an agencies and found that there are 15GB of scanned documents in recent two years.

The architecture of the system is shown in Figure 17. Given a paper document, after scanning and uploading, the system will convert the image to the text. A document then is stored in a tube of the scanned image and the OCR text. The system allows users texting to search and return both the original image and the content. To search efficiently, we use Elasticsearch², a highly scalable open-source full-text search and analytic engine.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented three image preprocessing methods to improve the OCR performance for scanned documents. The experimental results have shown that our methods

²<https://www.elastic.co/>

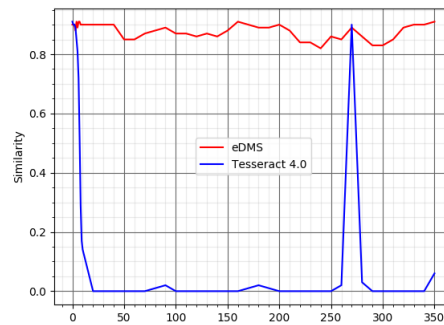


Fig. 14. Similarity on non-Table dataset with different skew angle

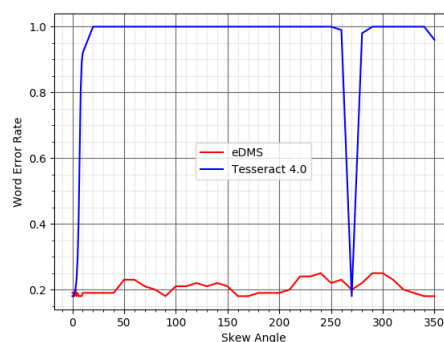


Fig. 15. WER on non-Table dataset with different skew angle

can process documents rotated by arbitrary angles and analyze tables with complex structures. As a result, the method boosts Tesseract significantly. The paper also introduced a smart scanned document management system that supports the paper work of many agencies and organizations.

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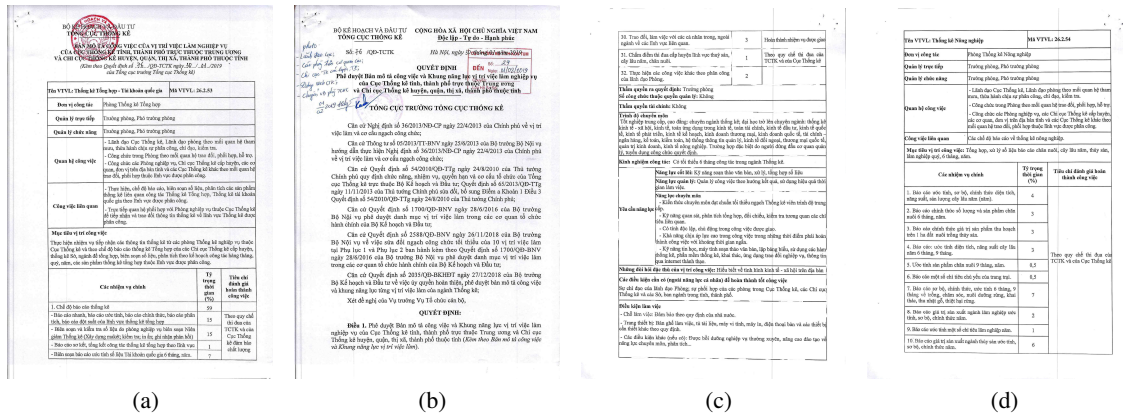


Fig. 16. Some failure cases (a) containing a seal (b) mixing printed and handwritten characters, (c) noise lines (d) blur lines.

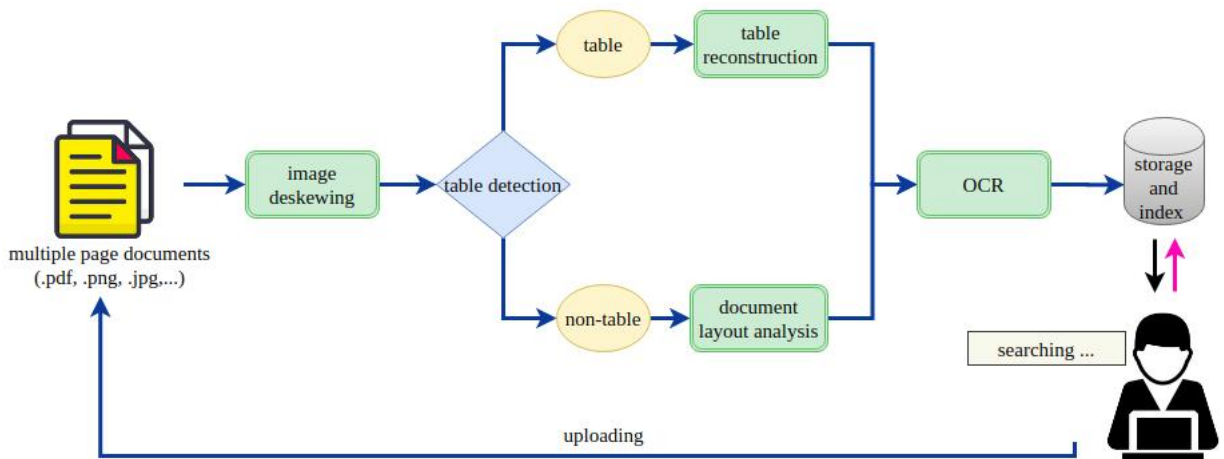


Fig. 17. The eDMS architecture

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Appendix A Results obtained from eDMS system

The output of the eDMS system for some scanned documents types are shown in Figures 18, 19, 20, and 21.

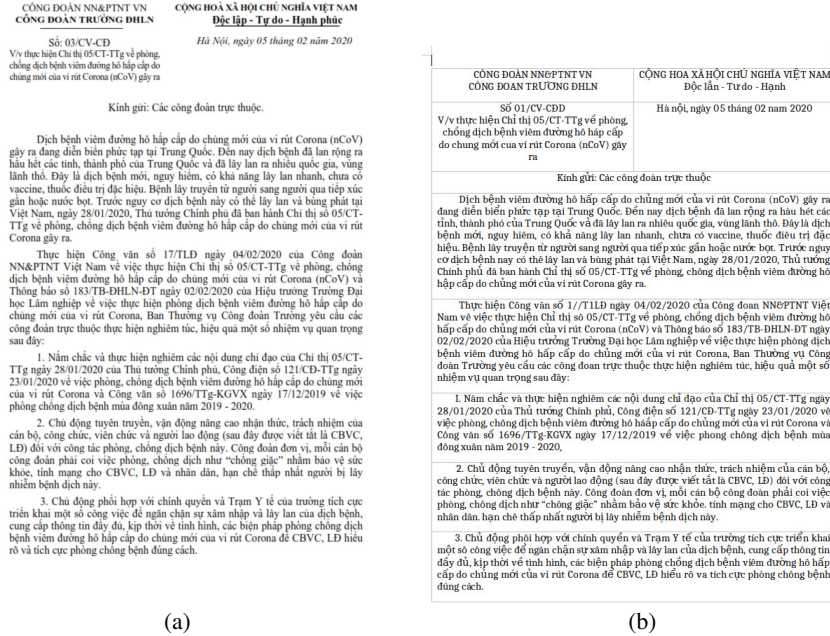


Fig. 18. A document just contains text

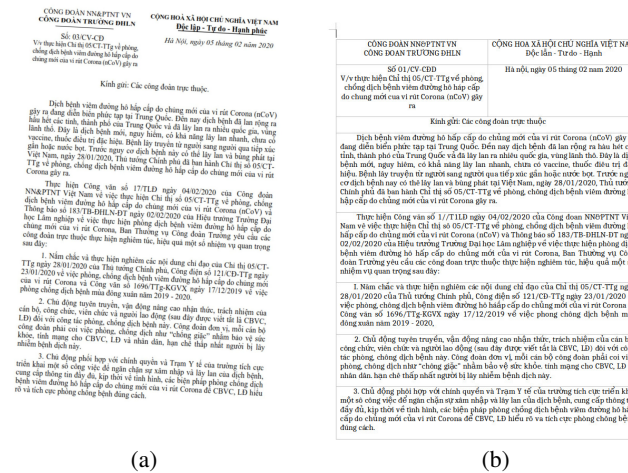
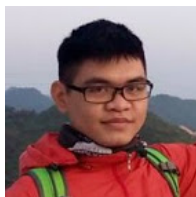


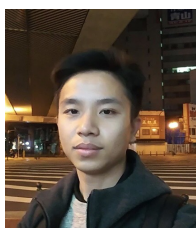
Fig. 19. A skewed document image



Nguyen Duy Tung Khanh graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering degree from Le Quy Don Technical University, majoring in Information Technology in 2018. He is currently teaching assistant at Department of Information Security, Faculty of Information Technology, Le Quy Don Technical University, Vietnam. His research interests include machine learning and information security.



Tran Manh Dat He is currently a student at Faculty of Information Technology, Le Quy Don Technical University, Vietnam. His current interests include computer vision, NLP and embedded systems for autonomous machines.



Pham Van Dan He is currently a student at Faculty of Information Technology, Le Quy Don Technical University, Vietnam. His current interests include computer vision and speech processing.

NÂNG CAO CHẤT LƯỢNG NHẬN DẠNG KÝ TỰ QUANG HỌC CHO HỆ THỐNG QUẢN LÝ VĂN BẢN THÔNG MINH

Tóm tắt

Chất lượng ảnh là yếu tố quan trọng đối với hiệu năng của mô hình Nhận dạng ký tự quang học (OCR). Các vấn đề khác nhau từ dữ liệu đầu vào cản trở sự thành công trong việc nhận dạng như bố cục không đồng nhất, độ lệch (ảnh bị xoay hoặc méo) và cỡ chữ khác nhau. Bài báo này đã nghiên cứu một số thuật toán tiền xử lý dữ liệu bao gồm khử lệch, phân tích cấu trúc bảng và bố cục tài liệu để nâng cao độ chính xác của mô hình OCR và sau đó xây dựng một hệ thống tổng thể cho việc quản lý tài liệu. Chúng tôi đã kiểm định các thuật toán bằng phần mềm OCR nổi tiếng là Tesseract. Các thử nghiệm trên tập dữ liệu thực cho thấy rằng các phương pháp của chúng tôi có thể xử lý chính xác hình ảnh tài liệu với các góc quay tùy ý và các bố cục khác nhau. Do đó, độ chính xác theo từ trong Tesseract có thể tăng 23 % đối với các tài liệu có cấu trúc phức tạp. Chất lượng của văn bản đầu ra cho phép xây dựng hệ thống lưu trữ và tìm kiếm văn bản một cách hiệu quả.