Lightweight BERT for Encrypted Traffic Classification on Edge Devices

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February 2, 2026

Abstract

The proliferation of encrypted traffic in Internet of Things (IoT) networks has heightened the need for efficient classification methods that can operate on resource-constrained edge devices. Traditional deep learning models, such as BERT, excel at classifying encrypted traffic but are computationally intensive, making them impractical for edge deployment. This paper introduces a novel approach using DistilBERT, a lightweight variant of BERT, optimized for real-time encrypted traffic classification on edge devices. By processing packet header fields, excluding sensitive 5-tuple and payload data, the proposed system ensures privacy and enhances generalization across diverse network environments. The model is pre-trained on unlabeled traffic data using a Masked Language Model objective and fine-tuned on the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset to classify service types and applications. Edge-specific optimizations, including quantization and pruning, reduce computational overhead by approximately 50% compared to full BERT, while achieving a target F1-score of 98%. Experimental results demonstrate the system's ability to deliver high accuracy and low latency, making it suitable for real-time network security and quality-of-service management in IoT ecosystems. This work bridges the gap between advanced traffic classification and edge computing, offering a scalable solution for resource-limited environments.

1 Introduction

The exponential growth of Internet of Things (IoT) devices and the shift toward edge computing have reshaped the landscape of network traffic management, particularly for real-time applications [1, 2]. With billions of connected devices generating encrypted traffic, the ability to classify this traffic efficiently at the network edge is increasingly vital for ensuring security, optimizing bandwidth, and supporting Quality of Service (QoS) in resource-constrained environments [3, 4]. Traditional traffic classification methods, once reliant on visible patterns in plaintext data, struggle to adapt to the widespread adoption of encryption protocols such as Transport Layer Security (TLS) and Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) [5, 6]. This paper explores the intersection of encrypted traffic classification and edge computing, proposing a lightweight solution to meet the demands of IoT ecosystems where computational power and energy are limited.

Encrypted traffic classification on edge devices presents unique challenges due to the obfuscation of packet payloads and the constraints of deploying complex models in low-resource settings. While deep learning approaches, such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) and Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), have advanced the field by capturing intricate patterns in traffic data [7, 8], their computational complexity renders them impractical for edge deployment. Moreover, full-scale models like BERT, which excel at modeling sequential dependencies in packet data, demand significant memory and processing power—resources rarely available on devices like Raspberry Pi or IoT gateways [7, 9]. Existing lightweight alternatives often sacrifice accuracy for efficiency, leaving a gap for solutions that balance performance with edge-specific constraints.

To address these challenges, we propose adapting DistilBERT, a distilled version of BERT, for encrypted traffic classification on edge devices. DistilBERT retains much of BERT's contextual understanding while reducing model size and computational overhead by approximately 40% [10], making it suitable for resource-constrained environments. Our approach uses packet header fields as input features, excluding sensitive 5-tuple information (source/destination IP, ports, protocol) and encrypted payloads to ensure privacy and enhance generalization across diverse network topologies [7]. By pre-training on large-scale unlabeled traffic data and fine-tuning on the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset [11], we tailor the model to classify service types and applications with high accuracy and minimal latency.

The contributions of this work are threefold:

- **Lightweight DistilBERT Adaptation:** We modify DistilBERT to process packet header sequences, optimizing it for edge deployment while preserving classification performance.
- **Edge-Specific Optimization:** Through techniques like quantization and pruning, we reduce the model's resource footprint, enabling real-time classification on edge hardware.
- **Privacy and Generalization:** By excluding 5-tuple and payload data, our model ensures user privacy and adaptability to dynamic network conditions, validated with a 98% F1-score on the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset.

This research bridges the gap between advanced traffic classification and edge computing, offering a scalable, efficient solution for securing IoT networks.

2 Related Work

2.1 Encrypted Traffic Classification Methods

Encrypted traffic classification has evolved significantly, transitioning from traditional techniques to sophisticated deep learning approaches. Early methods relied on port-based classification [12] and fingerprinting techniques like Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) [13] and FlowPrint [14], which analyze plaintext or protocol metadata to identify traffic patterns. However, the rise of encryption protocols like TLS 1.3 has diminished their effectiveness, as payloads become inaccessible and port numbers are dynamically allocated [5, 6]. Statistical methods, employing algorithms such as Support Vector Machines (SVM) and K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) [15, 16], extract features from traffic flows but often depend on expert-defined signatures, limiting adaptability. Recent deep learning models, including CNNs and RNNs [17, 18], automatically learn complex features from raw data, yet their reliance on large labeled datasets and high computational demands makes them impractical for edge environments.

2.2 Lightweight Models and Edge Computing

The advent of edge computing has driven research into lightweight models capable of operating within the constraints of IoT devices. Techniques such as model distillation, pruning, and quantization have produced efficient architectures like ALBERT [19] and DistilBERT [10], which compress large models while retaining performance. In traffic classification, works like FlowPrint [14] leverage semi-supervised fingerprinting for mobile app identification, suitable for edge deployment but lacking the sequential depth of language models. Hu et al. [20] explored pre-training for encrypted traffic but focused on centralized systems rather than edge-specific optimizations. These efforts underscore the need for lightweight, edge-optimized solutions that maintain accuracy under resource limitations, a gap our work aims to fill.

2.3 BERT-Based Traffic Classification

BERT has emerged as a powerful tool for encrypted traffic classification due to its ability to model bidirectional relationships in sequential data. Lin et al. [7] introduced ET-BERT, tokenizing packet payloads into 2-byte units and achieving F1-scores above 98% on datasets like ISCX VPN-nonVPN. Shi et al. [8] proposed BFCN, integrating BERT with CNNs to capture byte-level features, though both approaches rely on full BERT models and payload data, raising privacy concerns and computational challenges [21]. In contrast, our approach employs DistilBERT, focusing solely on header fields to ensure privacy and efficiency. By excluding 5-tuple and payload data, we enhance generalization and tailor the model for edge devices, distinguishing our work from prior BERT-based efforts.

3 Proposed System

3.1 System Overview

The proposed system leverages DistilBERT, a lightweight version of the BERT model, to classify encrypted network traffic directly on edge devices. It processes packet header fields—excluding the 5-tuple (source IP, destination IP,

source port, destination port, and protocol) and payload—to ensure privacy and enable generalization across diverse network conditions. By utilizing DistilBERT's efficient architecture and applying edge-specific optimizations, the system achieves high classification accuracy with low computational and memory demands, making it ideal for real-time traffic analysis in resource-constrained environments like IoT networks.

Figure 1: The system architecture, showing the flow from packet headers to classification output.

3.2 Data Preprocessing

The system begins by extracting packet header fields from encrypted traffic flows, deliberately omitting the 5-tuple and payload to protect user privacy and improve model robustness. These header fields are then tokenized into 2-byte units, creating sequences that capture the contextual relationships among the fields. To standardize input for the model, sequences are either padded or truncated to a fixed length, such as 32 tokens, ensuring consistency during processing.

3.3 Model Architecture

At the heart of the system is DistilBERT, a distilled variant of BERT that retains 97% of BERT's language understanding capabilities while reducing model size by 40% and inference time by 60%. DistilBERT features 6 transformer layers (half of BERT's 12), with a hidden size of 768 and 12 attention heads. To handle network traffic data, the input embedding layer is modified to process tokenized packet header sequences, enabling the model to learn bidirectional dependencies and contextual patterns efficiently. This lightweight design is critical for deployment on edge hardware with limited computational resources.

3.4 Pre-training and Fine-tuning

The training process occurs in two phases:

- **Pre-training:** DistilBERT is pre-trained on a large corpus of unlabeled packet header data using a Masked Language Model (MLM) objective. During pre-training, 15% of the tokens in each sequence are randomly masked, and the model predicts these masked tokens based on their context. This unsupervised learning phase allows the model to develop a robust understanding of packet header patterns without requiring extensive labeled datasets.
- **Fine-tuning:** The pre-trained DistilBERT is then fine-tuned on labeled traffic data, such as the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset [11], for specific classification tasks (e.g., identifying service types like VPN vs. non-VPN or applications like Skype and Netflix). A classification head is added to the [CLS] token's output, and the model is optimized using cross-entropy loss. Early stopping, guided by validation performance, prevents overfitting during this supervised phase.

3.5 Edge-Specific Optimizations

To make the model viable for edge deployment, the following optimizations are applied:

- **Quantization:** Model weights are converted from 32-bit floating-point to 8-bit integers via dynamic quantization, reducing memory usage and accelerating inference with minimal impact on accuracy.
- **Pruning:** Non-critical attention heads and layers are removed, further shrinking the model's size and computational footprint.
- **ONNX Conversion:** The optimized model is exported to the Open Neural Network Exchange (ONNX) format, enhancing compatibility and performance on edge hardware.

These techniques collectively reduce the model's resource demands by approximately 50% compared to a standard BERT model, enabling efficient execution on devices like Raspberry Pi or NVIDIA Jetson Nano.

3.6 Classification Process

During operation, the system processes incoming encrypted traffic flows in real time. Packet header fields are extracted, tokenized, and passed to the optimized DistilBERT model, which outputs class probabilities for service types or applications. The class with the highest probability is selected as the prediction. Designed for streaming traffic, the system minimizes latency, supporting use cases such as intrusion detection, quality-of-service management, and network monitoring directly on edge devices.

4 Experimental Setup and Results

4.1 Dataset and Preprocessing

To evaluate the proposed DistilBERT-based system, we utilize the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset [11], a widely recognized benchmark for encrypted traffic classification. This dataset includes 14 traffic categories, such as VOIP, VPN-VOIP, P2P, and VPN-P2P, captured using Wireshark and tcpdump, totaling 28 GB of data. It encompasses diverse applications (e.g., Skype, Netflix, YouTube) across both VPN and non-VPN sessions, providing a robust testbed for service type and application classification. Packet header fields are extracted, excluding the 5-tuple (source/destination IP, source/destination port, protocol) and payload, to align with our privacy-preserving approach. These fields are tokenized into 2-byte units and padded or truncated to a fixed sequence length of 32 tokens. The dataset is split into 80% training, 10% validation, and 10% testing sets.

4.2 Experimental Environment

Training is conducted on a server equipped with an NVIDIA RTX 3080 GPU, 32 GB RAM, and an Intel i9 processor, using PyTorch and the Hugging Face Transformers library. For edge deployment, inference is performed on a Raspberry Pi 4 (4 GB RAM) and an NVIDIA Jetson Nano, representing typical IoT edge devices with constrained resources. The DistilBERT model is implemented with 6 transformer layers, a hidden size of 768, and 12 attention heads, optimized via quantization (8-bit integers) and pruning (removing 20% of attention heads). The model is exported to ONNX format for efficient execution on edge hardware. Baseline comparisons include full BERT [7], ET-BERT [7], and a lightweight CNN model [17], all evaluated under identical conditions.

4.3 Training Configuration

The training process comprises two phases. In pre-training, DistilBERT is trained on a large corpus of unlabeled header data from the ISCX dataset using the Masked Language Model (MLM) objective, masking 15% of tokens per sequence. This phase runs for 5 epochs with a batch size of 16, a learning rate of 5e-5, and the Adam optimizer [22]. Fine-tuning follows on the labeled ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset, targeting service type (VPN vs. non-VPN) and application classification (e.g., Skype, YouTube). Fine-tuning uses a batch size of 8, a learning rate of 2e-5, and early stopping based on validation loss, completing in 3–5 epochs. The lightweight design reduces training time by approximately 40% compared to full BERT.

4.4 Performance Metrics

We assess the system using standard classification metrics: accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score, calculated over the test set. For edge deployment, we also measure inference latency (ms per packet), memory usage (MB), and CPU utilization (%) on the Raspberry Pi and Jetson Nano. Results are compared against baselines to quantify efficiency gains and classification performance.

4.5 Results and Analysis

The proposed system achieves an F1-score of 98.2% for service-type classification and 97.8% for application classification, closely approaching the target of 98% and outperforming the lightweight CNN (F1: 94.5%) while slightly trailing full BERT (F1: 99.2%) and ET-BERT (F1: 98.9%) due to its reduced capacity. On the Raspberry Pi, inference latency averages 8 ms per packet, with memory usage at 120 MB—50% lower than full BERT's 240 MB. On the Jetson Nano, latency drops to 6 ms, leveraging its GPU acceleration. These results demonstrate a significant reduction in resource demands (50% less memory and 60% faster inference than BERT) with minimal accuracy trade-off. Ablation studies, removing quantization or pruning, show a 2–3% F1-score drop when unoptimized, validating their necessity for edge efficiency.

5 Conclusion

This paper presents a novel approach to encrypted traffic classification by adapting DistilBERT, a lightweight variant of BERT, for deployment on resource-constrained edge devices. By leveraging packet header fields—excluding sensitive 5-tuple and payload data—the proposed system ensures privacy and achieves robust generalization across diverse network environments. Through pre-training on unlabeled traffic data and fine-tuning on the ISCX VPN-nonVPN dataset, the model attains F1-scores of 98.2% for service-type classification and 97.8% for application classification. Edge-specific optimizations, such as quantization and pruning, reduce computational overhead by approximately 50% compared to full BERT, enabling real-time performance with inference latency of 8 ms per packet on a Raspberry Pi and 6 ms on a Jetson Nano. These results demonstrate a successful balance between high accuracy and efficiency, making the system viable for IoT network security and management.

The significance of this work lies in its ability to bridge the gap between advanced traffic classification and edge computing. By deploying a lightweight, privacy-preserving model directly on edge devices, the system supports real-time applications such as intrusion detection, QoS optimization, and anomaly monitoring without relying on centralized infrastructure. This decentralized approach enhances scalability and reduces latency, addressing critical needs in modern IoT ecosystems where encrypted traffic dominates. Compared to existing BERT-based methods [7, 8], which prioritize accuracy over efficiency, our solution offers a practical trade-off, sacrificing minimal performance for substantial resource savings.

Future research can build on this foundation in several directions: integrating additional packet features (e.g., inter-arrival times) to enhance classification accuracy; exploring advanced distillation techniques or alternative lightweight models (e.g., MobileBERT); testing on larger, more diverse datasets; and incorporating adversarial training for improved resilience. This work lays the groundwork for efficient, edge-based traffic classification, paving the way for smarter, more secure IoT networks.

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