

Revolutionizing how we keep track of time in cyber-physical systems

New five-year, \$4 million Frontier award aims to improve the coordination of time in networked physical systems

News via [National Science Foundation](#)

The National Science Foundation (NSF) today announced a five-year, \$4 million award to tackle the challenge of synchronizing time in cyber-physical systems (CPS)--systems that integrate sensing, computation, control and networking into physical objects and infrastructure.

Examples of cyber-physical systems include autonomous cars, aircraft autopilot systems, tele-robotics devices and energy-efficient buildings, among many others.

The grant brings together expertise from five universities and establishes a center-scale research activity to improve the accuracy, efficiency, robustness and security with which computers maintain knowledge of time and synchronize it with other networked devices in the emerging "Internet of Things."

Time has always been a critical issue in science and technology. From pendulums to atomic clocks, the accurate measurement of time has helped drive scientific discovery and engineering innovation throughout history. For example, advances in distributed clock synchronization technology enabled GPS satellites to precisely measure distances. This, in turn, created new opportunities and even entirely new industries, enabling the development of mobile navigation systems. However, many other areas of clock technology are still ripe for development.



João Hespanha

"It is widely appreciated that constraints on energy storage and communication bandwidth typically limit the performance of cyber-physical systems, what we are now starting to discover is that the accuracy of clocks can also limit their performance," commented [João Hespanha](#), professor of electrical and computer engineering at UC Santa Barbara and co-PI for the project. "RoseLine will enable us to discover what these limitations may be and how to overcome them in practice."

Time synchronization presents a particular fundamental challenge in emerging applications of CPS, which connect computers, communication, sensors and actuator technologies to objects and play a critical role in our physical and network infrastructure. Cyber-physical systems depend on precise knowledge of time to infer location, control communication and accurately coordinate activities. They are critical to real-time situational awareness, security and control in a broad and growing range of applications.

"The National Science Foundation has long supported research to integrate cyber and physical systems and has supported the experimentation and prototyping of these systems in a number of different sectors--from transportation and energy to medical systems," said Farnam Jahanian, head of NSF's Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering. "As the 'Internet of Things' becomes more pervasive in our lives, precise timing will be critical for these systems to be more responsive, reliable and efficient."

The NSF award will support a project called RoseLine, which seeks to develop new clocking technologies, synchronization protocols, operating system methods, as well as control and sensing algorithms. The project is led by engineering faculty from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and includes electrical engineering and computer science faculty from UCSB; the University of California, San Diego; Carnegie Mellon University; and the University of Utah.

"Through the Roseline project, we will drive cyber-physical systems research with a deeper understanding of time and its trade-offs and advance the state-of-the-art in clocking circuits and platform architectures," said UCLA professor Mani Srivastava, principal investigator on the project.

Today, most computing systems use tiny clocks to manage time in a relatively simplistic and idealized fashion. For example, software in today's computers has little visibility into, and control over, the quality of time information received from its underlying hardware. At the same time, the clocks have little, if any, knowledge of the quality of time needed by the software, nor any ability to adapt to it. This leaves computing systems that are dependent on time vulnerable to complex and catastrophic disruptions.

The Roseline team will address this problem by rethinking and re-engineering how the knowledge of time is handled across a computing system's hardware and software.

"Roseline will drive accurate timing information deep into the software system," said Rajesh Gupta, University of California, San Diego computer science and engineering chair and a co-principal investigator on the project. "It will enable robust distributed control of smart grids, precise localization of structural faults in bridges and ultra-low-power wireless sensors."

Roseline will have a broad impact across many sectors, including smart electrical grids, aerospace systems, precision manufacturing, autonomous vehicles, safety systems and infrastructure monitoring.

In addition to Hespanha, Srivastava, and Gupta, the Roseline team includes Sudhakar Pamarti of UCLA, Ragonathan Rajkumar and Anthony Rowe of Carnegie Mellon University and Thomas Schmid of the University of Utah.

Beyond the research and testing of components, project leaders plan to integrate CPS and timing components into graduate and undergraduate course materials and engage pre-college students in outreach efforts, including the Los Angeles Computing Circle, which focuses on teaching real-world applications of computer science to students from local high schools.

"The measurement, distribution and synchronization of time have always been critical in science and technology, and there is a long history of new time-related technologies revolutionizing society," said David Corman, NSF program director for CPS. "As computation becomes embedded in the physical systems around us, it becomes all the more important that computers be able to know time accurately, efficiently and reliably. I am excited to see the Roseline team undertake this challenging and important task."

NSF's long-standing support for CPS research and education spans a range of awards amounting to an investment of nearly \$200 million during the last five years.

Images



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