## Towards a Unified Terminology of Processing Levels for Low-cost Air-Quality Sensors

Philipp Schneider1, Alena Bartonova1, Nuria Castell1, Franck R. Dauge1, Michel Gerboles2, Gayle S. W. Hagler3, Christoph Hüglin­4, Roderic L. Jones5, Sean Khan6, Alastair C. Lewis7, Bas Mijling8, Michael Müller4, Michele Penza9, Laurent Spinelle10, Brian Stacey11, Matthias Vogt1, Joost Wesseling12, Ronald W. Williams3

1NILU - Norwegian Institute for Air Research, PO Box 100, Kjeller, Norway  
2European Commission – Joint Research Centre, Ispra, Italy

3Office of Research and Development, United States Environmental Protection Agency, Research Triangle Park, NC, USA

4Empa, Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology, Duebendorf, Switzerland

5Department of Chemistry, University of Cambridge, UK

6United Nations Environment Programme, Science Division, Global Environment Monitoring Unit, Nairobi, Kenya

7National Centre for Atmospheric Science, University of York, Heslington, York, YO105DD, United Kingdom.

8Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI), De Bilt, the Netherlands

9Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (ENEA), Brindisi Research Center, Brindisi, Italy

10French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks (INERIS), 60550 Verneuil-en-Halatte, France

11Ricardo Energy & Environment, Gemini Building, Fermi Avenue, Harwell, Oxon, OX11 0QR, United Kingdom  
12National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, Bilthoven, Netherlands

Low-cost sensor systems for measuring air quality have received widespread scientific and media attention over recent years. It has become an established technical methodology to improve the data quality of such sensor systems by co-locating them at traditional air quality monitoring stations equipped with reference instrumentation and field-calibrating individual units using various statistical techniques. Methods range from (multi-)linear regression to more complex statistical techniques, often using additional predictor variables such as air temperature or relative humidity (e.g. Spinelle et al., 2017), and occasionally data not actually measured by the sensor system itself (e.g. station observations or model output). Most of these techniques improve the level of agreement between sensor-derived data and reference data, in many cases eliminating issues such as chemical interferences and sensor-to-sensor variability. It is not always clear, however, the extent to which the data arising from such processing are still a true and independent measurement by the sensor system, or some blend of secondary data and model prediction. Noticing this development, Hagler et al. (2018) warned that some systems may use predictor variables for calibration in such a way that a line is crossed from justifiable and empirical correction of a known artifact to a method that is essentially a predictive statistical model. In addition, the processing steps that are carried out along the way are often not clearly communicated. The current lack of governmental or third-party standards for low-cost sensor performance (Williams et al, 2019) and occasional lack of distinction between sensors and sensor systems further complicates data processing.

Adding to the observations and recommendations made by Hagler et al. (2018), we have further noticed that there is substantial and consistent confusion within both the scientific community and the interested public regarding the amount and type of processing applied to sensor data, and at what point derived data can be considered to have lost a meaningful link to quantitative traceability. The relevance of this issue to air quality sensors is significant since in most countries air quality targets and standards are set out in primary legislation and measured attainment of those targets has demanding traceability requirements. Clarity regarding the level of sensor data processing is important for evaluation of sensor technology, as well as correct use and interpretation of its data.

To address this challenge we propose a unified terminology of processing levels for low-cost air quality sensor systems. A strict sequence of processing levels is already common practice in satellite remote sensing, where it has been in wide use across multiple agencies for decades (EOS Data Panel, 1986). We have adapted these levels and suggest a sequence of processing levels for data from low-cost air quality sensor systems (Table 1).

Table 1: Proposed processing levels for low-cost sensor systems for air quality. T/RH stands for temperature and relative humidity. The spatial support of all Levels except Level-4 is point measurements at single locations or for entire networks.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level | Name | Definition | Example: Gas-sensors | Example: Particle-sensors |
| Level-0 | Raw measurements | Original measurand produced by sensor system | Voltage corresponding to measured quantity, such as current for electrochemical and infrared sensors, resistance/ conductance for metal-oxide sensors | Voltage corresponding to current due to light scattered in nephelometers, or to binned counts for optical particle-counters |
| Level-1 | Intermediate geophysical quantities | Estimate derived from corresponding Level-0 data, using basic physical principles or simple calibration equations, and no compensation schemes. | For electrochemical sensors, NO2 concentration in µg/m3 or ppb, using only Level-0 data from the NO2 sensor itself with no additional corrections beyond factory calibration ("raw data in concentration units") | Binned particle-counts or PM mass in µg/m3 derived from Level-0 data using simple calibration/assumed particle-density |
| Level-2A | Standard geophysical quantities | Estimate using sensor plus other on-board sensors demonstrated as appropriate for artifact correction and directly related to measurement principle[[1]](#footnote-1) | NO2 concentration in µg/m3 or ppb, derived from onboard NO2/NO/O3 sensors, corrected for interferences and/or T/RH effects using onboard data | PM concentration in µg/m3, corrected for T/RH effects with onboard-measured T/RH |
| Level-2B | Standard geophysical quantities-extended | As Level-2A but using external data demonstrated as appropriate for artifact correction and directly related to measurement principle1 | NO2 concentration in µg/m3 or ppb, derived from onboard NO­2/NO/O3 sensors, corrected for interferences induced by measurement principle (e.g. O3 correction for NO2 electrochemical sensors and/or T/RH effects using data from nearby station) | As Level-2A but using external T/RH from nearby station |
| Measurement/prediction boundary | | | | |
| Level-3 | Advanced geophysical quantities | Estimate using sensor plus internal/external inputs, **not** constrained to data proven as causes of measurement bias or related to measurement principle1 | NO2 concentration in µg/m3 or ppb, derived from Level-2A or Level-2B data, further corrected by proxies known to be correlated with NO2, e.g. emissions or modeled NO2 | As Level-2B but also using model results for prediction |
| Level-4 | Spatially continuous geophysical quantities | Spatially continuous maps derived from network of sensor systems | Map of NO2 concentrations in µg/m3 or ppb, e.g. by assimilation of network data into physical model | Map of PM2.5 concentrations in µg/m3, e.g. by assimilation of network data into physical model |

The proposed processing levels range from Level-0, indicating output from the electronically-interfaced raw sensor signal, to Level-4, representing a spatially continuous map of concentrations derived from a network of sensor systems, for example using spatial interpolation or data assimilation into a chemical transport model (Schneider et al., 2017). The levels therefore represent a sequence from least processed to most processed information. Loosely mirroring the processing levels typically used for satellite data, Level-0 represents raw instrument output, Level-2 represents the standard product used for most scientific applications, and Level-4 represents a combination of the data with other spatial data sources (e.g. a model). However, in the specifics the proposed levels differ from those used in remote sensing to accommodate the unique requirements of low-cost sensor data.

The usability of data at each processing level depends on the end-user application. Level-1 or -2 data, if it meets the right standards, may be useful for measuring progress against air quality targets. Level-4 is a blended product using data from multiple sources that may be most useful and applicable for public information systems. Note that the level designation merely represents the amount of processing carried out to the dataset and does not reflect data quality. The latter needs to be ensured using appropriate QA/QC strategies when sensor systems are deployed. The levels further do not have to be passed sequentially but can be labels describing the approximate amount of processing applied to a data product (e.g. directly going from Level-0 to Level-2). The levels do not imply anything about processing location (e.g. in the sensor system itself or in the cloud) or whether data is available in near real-time. Most of the sensors systems that can be readily purchased on the market nowadays offer Level-1 or Level-2 data, although some open systems also provide Level-0 data. We consider the step from Level-2 to Level-3 as the transition point from true measurements to a type of statistical prediction or modelling. All levels except Level-4 apply to individual sensor systems and entire networks. However, exploiting the “network knowledge” can add significant value to the data. Such cases are mostly covered by Level-3, but, once more mature, network-based processing techniques could conceivably receive their own terminology.

It should be noted that we do not believe that any of the described levels are inherently better than others — they simply serve different purposes and user communities. However, we do think it is essential that the type and amount of processing performed on a given sensor dataset is communicated transparently so that the data users can make informed decisions. This is particularly important for scientific, operational, and policy applications where methods have to be thoroughly documented and their fitness for purpose demonstrated.

We believe that the presented harmonized terminology of processing levels can contribute towards this goal without requiring the sensor manufacturers to necessarily publicize their proprietary algorithms (although entirely open systems are preferable, particularly for scientific applications). It is further our hope that adoption of the suggested processing levels (or a derivation) within the community will contribute to simplifying and improving the communication between manufacturers, researchers, and other users. Overall, we think that a unified terminology is a first step towards improved data integrity and transparency and that it will ultimately lead to a better use of this new technology.

### References

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1. See Hagler et al. (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)