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Gene expression

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RNASeqExpressionBrowser—a web interface to browse and visualize high-throughput expression data

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ABSTRACT

Motivation: RNA-seq techniques generate massive amounts of expression data. Several pipelines (e.g. Tophat and Cufflinks) are broadly applied to analyse these datasets. However, accessing and handling the analytical output remain challenging for non-experts.

Results: We present the RNASeqExpressionBrowser, an open-source web interface that can be used to access the output from RNA-seq expression analysis packages in different ways, as it allows browsing for genes by identifiers, annotations or sequence similarity. Gene expression information can be loaded as long as it is represented in a matrix-like format. Additionally, data can be made available by setting up the tool on a public server. For demonstration purposes, we have set up a version providing expression information from the barley genome.

Availability and implementation: The source code and a show case are accessible at http://mips.helmholtz-muenchen.de/plant/RNASeqExpressionBrowser/.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Current high-throughput technologies, such as RNA-seq, allow researchers to generate massive amounts of gene expression data in short time. However, data analysis and intuitive visualization often remain a bottleneck for making the efficient use of generated data. For biologists with limited programming experience, accessing data output from RNA-seq pipelines in a meaningful manner poses a challenge: Manual search for genes of interest is time intensive if feasible at all, and generating non-automated visualizations for a list of genes of interest is a painstaking task. This task has become even more challenging for highly repetitive genomes like barley (The International Barley Sequencing Consortium, 2012) or wheat (Brenchley *et al.*, 2012), where *de novo* transcriptome assemblies result in hundred thousands of transcripts. The Tophat and Cufflinks (Trapnell *et al.*, 2009) workflow presents one of the standard workflows for analysing RNA-seq data and is broadly applied in life sciences' research. Packages to analyse data from these workflows that help to reduce the efforts for accessing the output data are available, e.g. CummeRbund (Trapnell *et al.*, 2012), RobiNA (Lohse *et al.*, 2012) or STAR (Wang *et al.*, 2013). However, accessing genes by sequence-information or annotations still requires some programming skills. Additionally, most tools work only locally, which makes sharing of the results difficult in cooperative research projects. In this article, we present the RNASeqExpressionBrowser, a web-based tool that can be used to easily access the results of expression analysis.

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2 METHODS

A crucial requirement for analysing expression data is to establish efficient methods for accessing genes of interest. RNASeqExpressionBrowser tackles this issue by enabling several search methods: It allows searching genes by gene annotation [e.g. Gene Ontology (Gene Ontology Consortium, 2004), Interpro], keyword search or via sequence similarity. In addition, the user can provide a list of genes as an input to inspect and download underlying expression values.

2.1 Data schema

High-throughput data from gene expression assays can be loaded, as long as they can be represented in a matrix-like format, with rows containing feature information (genes or isoforms) and columns harbouring sample information. We tested on output generated by Cuffdiff to calculate the expression of transcripts serving as input for the RNASeqExpressionBrowser, but, in principle, other formats that represent gene expression can be integrated. Following Cufflinks' notation, an experiment comprises a set of conditions (e.g. tissues, time points or treatments). One condition contains the summarized expression of one or more replicates. In Cufflinks, for each condition, all the transcripts are represented by fragments per kilobase of transcript per Million mapped reads value. In the RNASeqExpressionBrowser, several types of annotations can be provided for querying the genes (e.g. GO terms, domains and links to other databases).

2.2 Implementation and installation

The open-source software is intended to run on a Linux operating system and was implemented in the programming language Python. A MySQL database serves as a back-end, with Google Visualization API and Javascript as main technologies for data representation. For each experiment, a separate database, containing expression information and annotation, is created. For installing the RNASeqExpressionBrowser, a Python-based installation script is provided.

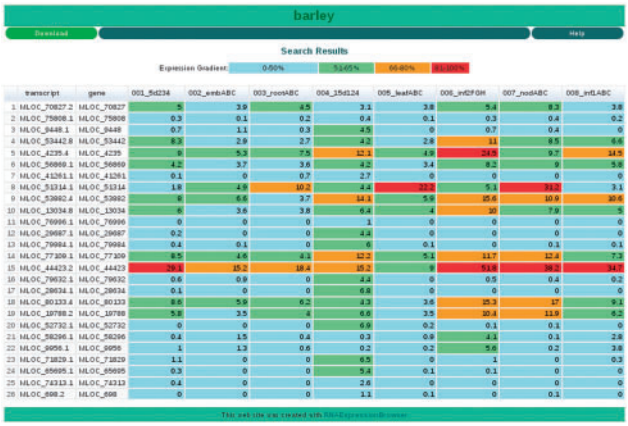

Fig. 1. The query result page displays the colour-coded expression values for the retrieved genes

2.3 Finding genes of interest

Within a particular experiment, genes can be searched by using several options: users can search by gene identifiers, keywords or annotation information (e.g. GO, Interpro). Because gene homology is often used for finding genes of interest, RNASeqExpressionBrowser also provides a sequence similarity search using BLAST (Altschul *et al.*, 1997). Genes that have been retrieved by the search are listed on a search results page together with their colour-coded expression values (Fig. 1).

2.4 Single gene reports

After selecting a gene from the search results page, a detailed gene report is shown, which contains a graphical and tabular summary of the expression data. Furthermore, annotation information and links to external databases are automatically included if provided during the installation.

2.5 Show case data

As a show case, the IBSC Barley expression data (The International Barley Sequencing Consortium, 2012) were used. These data comprise expression from eight tissues and annotations based on GO and Interpro. To demonstrate the linkage to external databases, we include links to MIPS PlantsDB (Nussbaumer *et al.*, 2013). This show case is also provided in the installation package.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Detecting candidate genes that are differentially expressed in a particular condition is an important and frequently used route to approach genes involved in processes of interest. Good expression data are one aspect on the route to approach genes of interest, but of equal importance are robust methods for detecting them (e.g. Anders and Huber, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2010; Trapnell *et al.*, 2013). RNASeqExpressionBrowser provides a bridge between preprocessing and the final steps of the analysis. While many researchers report their findings in a spreadsheet format, an interactive application like RNASeq-ExpressionBrowser enables to efficiently access existing information about predicted genes and their functions. In addition, it allows linking the data to existing databases. We are confident that for the broader community, this tool will be beneficial for their work with transcriptomics data.

4 AVAILABILITY

On the project website (http://mips.helmholtz-muenchen.de/plant/RNASeqExpressionBrowser/), we provide the source code as well as the show case data and additional information regarding the installation. The source code is freely accessible as an open source under the GNU Lesser General Public License (LGPL).

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Conflict of Interest: none declared.

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