

APPLYING SALIENCY MAP ANALYSIS TO CNNs ON PROTEIN SECONDARY STRUCTURE PREDICTION

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ABSTRACT

Deep learning techniques have been successfully transferred to the biomedical field, achieving higher performance but bringing opaqueness. While interpretability techniques are under current development, only a few authors have brought them to the biomedical field, and none of them has approached problems dealing with structural tagging. This work aims to apply one of such techniques—saliency maps—in the context of protein secondary-structure prediction. For doing so, a convolutional neural network was first trained, saliency maps were obtained from it, and different ways of aggregating them have been developed to gather meaningful insights on the network learning of the underlying problem structure. These preliminary techniques can be of double value: on one side, they may help biologists to get a better understanding on the underlying protein structural forming process; on the other, machine learning researchers can better understand their machines and spot their previously uncovered flaws.

Index Terms— Saliency Maps, Convolutional Neural Networks, Interpretability, Protein Secondary Structure Prediction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Secondary structure prediction is a long-time studied problem in bio-informatics. The 3D structure of a protein determines the function it is going to adopt in the cell and hence it is a valuable information for drug design, disease treatment or early diagnosis, among others. However, due to their molecular scale and complex environment, the protein structure cannot be easily measured and any attempt to do so remains costly. A more feasible alternative is utilising computational tools to make the predictions having as a base the amino-acid sequence (easy to obtain through DNA sequencing) and the proteins whose structure is already known. Predicting the secondary structure of the protein's amino-acids chain is often regarded as a middle step for tackling the much harder problem of predicting the 3D structure.

The protein secondary structure prediction problem is a sequence structural tagging problem: each element (amino-

acid) of the sequence protein has to be assigned a class (secondary structure). There are 21 different types of amino-acids (20 regular and amino-acid X grouping the non-regular ones) and eight possible goal classes, which are commonly known as Q8 and composed of 3 types of α -helices (H,G,I), two types of β -bridges (B,E), and three types of coils (T,S,L) [1]. Other relevant features of the amino-acids can also be added as inputs to facilitate the classification process. A common one whose addition brought a significant performance improvement is the Position Specific Substitution Matrices (PSSM) [2], which encode the evolutionary probability of finding substitutions in each element of the amino-acid chain. The final input sequence would have length l (variable from protein to protein) and width 42: the one-hot encoded amino-acid plus the 21 extra values of the PSSM, normalized to a range between 0 and 1 [3].

While at the early stages the secondary structure prediction problem was mainly tackled with statistics, towards the end of the century the application of neural networks became prevalent [4]. A new generation of deep learning approaches started recently with Zhou and Troyanskaya [5], who implemented a Generative Stochastic Network fed by a 1D Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) architecture, and later works that already included 1D CNNs with five or more layers [6, 7] or recurrent neural networks [8, 9], which are deep in the sense of signals being processed for many time-steps.

Saliency maps (also known as *attribution techniques* [10]) are a visualisation technique that aims to reveal which parts of an input sample are mainly responsible for the output decision made by a classification system. They work by generating a map of the same dimensions as the input and an importance value assigned to each element of the map, with higher values meaning the presence of the element was more decisive for making the decision. Depending on the way of calculating the importance value, saliency maps techniques can be broadly grouped into two categories: *perturbation-based approaches* (make modifications on the input and assess changes in the output) and *backpropagation-based approaches* (utilise the gradient of the output respect to the input for obtaining the importance information) [11]. The first group is similar in spirit to the techniques known as *sensitivity analysis* that are applied in many other fields of research. Although useful for

small input spaces, it becomes quickly intractable when the input size grows, as all possible combinations of inputs should be examined for a complete analysis. The second group, especially designed for neural networks, allows the computation of importance scores in a single backward pass, so its computational complexity significantly improves and hence it is the preferred option for such architectures.

The back-propagation approaches can be thought as a linear approximation of the classification function around a sample input point x_0 by applying a first-order Taylor expansion, as introduced by Simonyan et al. [12]:

$$f(x) \approx wx + b, \quad (1)$$

$$w = \left. \frac{\partial f}{\partial x} \right|_{x_0}. \quad (2)$$

In their simplest form, the saliency maps of back-propagation methods are equivalent to the gradient value on the input [12]. A second approach [13] would multiply the gradient by the input values to leverage out the gradients that don't carry relevant information. A last wave of methods proposes including a reference point and hence more closely resembling the Taylor approximation. Main examples of this trend are *integrated gradients* [14], *deep Taylor decomposition* [15] and *DeepLIFT* [11]. They overcome problems of previous methods such as saturation or discontinuities in the gradient, although they bring the extra difficulty of choosing an appropriate reference point.

2. PREVIOUS WORK

As a simplified version of saliency maps, Alipanahhi et al. [16] and Quang and Xie [17] spotted the segment the segment in the input genetic sequence that had the highest activation of the first-layer filters and compared them to known motifs. This approach only makes sense as long as the network has a single layer, but cannot be applied to deeper networks.

Alipanahi et al. [16] and Zhou and Troyanskaya [18] showed how genetic mutations affected the output of their network, which is a natural way of performing perturbation-based approaches in the field. Umarov and solovyev [19] substituted small windows of the sequence by random genetic code and assessed the differences in the output along the sequence by sliding such window. Kelley et al. [20] introduced known motifs at the centre of DNA sequences. All these can be categorised into the perturbation-based approach group and therefore need high computational times or not be exhaustive enough.

Gradient-based approaches have barely been translated to the biological field. Lanchantin et al. [21] include saliency maps with the form of $\text{gradient} * \text{input}$ for TF binding site classification. They extracted the window with the highest score from each saliency map and compared them with a

Q8 grouping		Explanation	%
α -helix	H	Helix with 4 turns	34.54
3_{10} -helix	G	Smaller helix with 3 turns	3.91
π -helix	I	Bigger helix with 5 turns	0.02
β -bridge	B	Isolated β -bridge	1.03
β -strand	E	Participates in β -ladders	21.78
Turn	T	Turns smaller than a helix	11.28
Bend	S	Curved piece	8.26
Loop	L	Sometimes also as coil (C)	19.19

Table 1. Targets for the secondary structure prediction problem, as defined by [1] in their Dictionary of Secondary Structure or Proteins (DSSP) and their presence on the training set.

database of known motifs, matching almost half of the motifs thus produced. Shrikumar et al. [11] developed the reference-based saliency map technique DeepLIFT and simulated a motif detection task within a genomic sequence to prove its effectiveness. Finnegan and Song [22] utilised Markov chain Monte Carlo methods to withdraw samples from the maximum entropy distribution around a single sequence and assessed the importance scores by looking at the variance of the samples at each position. This method was applied to a previously trained DNA-protein binding CNN and proved to have better results than DeepLIFT.

All these methods address classification problems where there is a single output (classification task) for each sequence. A significant difference between this work and previous papers that make use of saliency maps is that they perform many-to-one classification (one output class per input sequence/image), whereas the classification task for our problem is many-to-many (each position of the sequences is assigned a class), producing as many saliency maps as positions in a sequence. To the best of our knowledge, interpretability techniques have not been applied yet to this sort of problems.

3. METHODS

The experiments made use of the database produced and made public by Zhou and Troyanskaya [5]. It includes two subsets (training and test, with 5534 and 514 protein sequences of varying length, respectively) of proteins that come from different sources after removing the proteins that share 25% or more similarity, thus ensuring that the test set is composed of totally new samples. The proteins in the dataset already come in one-hot form, with their PSSM values and their Q8 class in one-hot form. The dataset is heavily imbalanced, as it can be seen in Table 1

The network architecture is composed of three successive convolutional neural networks and a dense layer on top. Each of the convolutional layers contains three sets of filters of size 3, 5 and 7, respectively, with 16 filters per size. There are skip connections at every convolutional layer. The dense layer has

200 neurons and is connected to the soft-max output layer. The convolution operations are carried out with padding at each end of the sequence to preserve the length throughout the process. The total window size of the network is 19, meaning that for making a single secondary structure classification the network obtains information from 9 adjacent positions at each side. The network has been built and trained using the open-source code developed by Jurtz et al. [9].

Saliency maps are calculated by the conventional technique of computing the gradient of the output with respect to the inputs and multiplying it by the value of the input (gradient * input) [23]. Every single position in a sequence produces a saliency map that spans the width of the input vector of size 42 and 9 positions to each side, due to the architecture’s window size of 19. Each output class has its independent saliency values, so the total size of a position saliency map is $8 \times 42 \times 19$.

The presence of overlapping saliency maps allows for different ways in which to aggregate them to extract meaningful information. If focus on a sequence of length l and want to obtain a single sequence-specific saliency map, we can add up the overlapping areas to form a saliency map of size $8 \times 42 \times l$. By changing the focus to a broader look on what the network has learnt, the addition of the saliency maps for the positions in all sequences could create a single saliency map of size $8 \times 42 \times 19$ that shows an average behaviour of the network. From this map we can extract general information about a particular class (creating a class-specific saliency map) or about a particular input (PSSM-specific saliency map).

4. RESULTS

The network described in the previous section has been trained for 400 epochs with gradient clipping at 20, regularisation parameter $\lambda = 10^{-4}$, and learning rate $\mu = 10^{-4}$. The epoch with highest validation error (on a validation subset with 512 sequences of the training set) reaches an accuracy of 76.57% on the train set and 67.74% on the test set, not far from the 71% reached by the state-of-the-art [3]. The aim of this work is not to outperform the state-of-the-art predictions, but to build a network with moderately simple structure (to keep the calculation times of saliency maps on reasonable levels) and fair performance. We believe that the techniques of analysis here presented and the conclusions withdrawn from them can be transferred to current state-of-the-art methods without losing validity.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of per-sequence accuracies over different sizes. As it could be expected, the variance in mean accuracy increases with shorter sequences. Higher accuracies can be expected from sequences rich in α -helices and lower accuracies for sequences high in coils. Figure 2 displays the resulting confusion matrix of the predictions on the test set. It is similar to the ones obtained on other state-of-the-art networks [6]. It is noticeable that the π -helix (I)

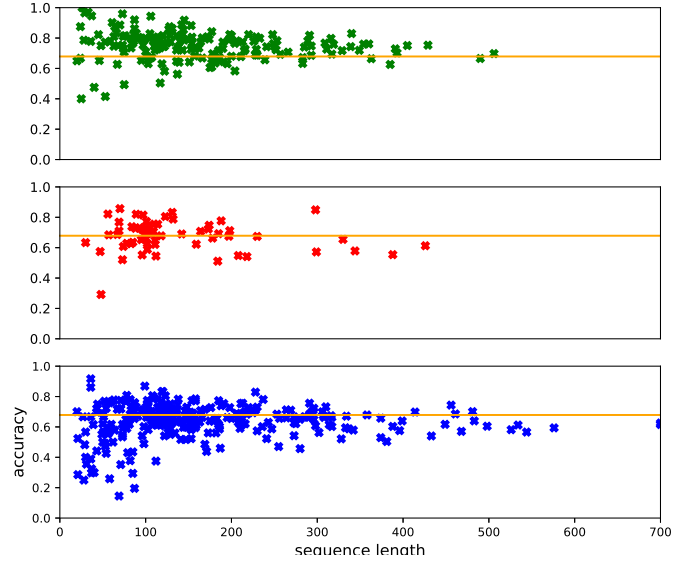


Fig. 1. Mean sequence accuracy against sequence length for the proteins in test set. Each point represents a single protein sequence and the horizontal line is the total mean accuracy. They have been separated by the prevalent group of classes on them: on top, majority of α -helices (H, G, I); at the middle, β -sheets (E, B); and below, coils (L, S, T).

true	L	11036	38	3072	271	0	945	1209	1349
	B	515	47	325	13	0	84	92	105
	E	2171	30	14427	60	0	582	331	415
	G	541	5	217	906	0	766	114	583
	I	5	0	2	0	0	21	0	2
	H	748	7	459	320	0	23743	156	724
	S	2898	13	942	162	0	662	2063	1576
	T	1568	3	538	463	0	1631	611	5199
		L	B	E	G	I	H	S	T
		predicted							

Fig. 2. Confusion matrix of the test set.

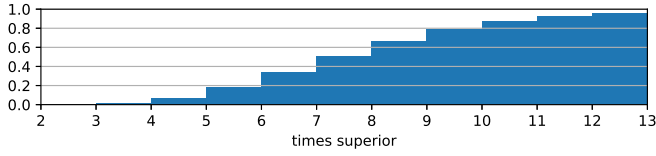


Fig. 3. Cumulative histogram of how much bigger are pssm saliency scores as compared to amino-acid saliency scores.

has never been given as prediction; its presence is so rare in the dataset that the machine keeps a higher accuracy by ignoring it. β -bridges (B) are also largely misrepresented for the same reasons. Loops present high levels of confusion with other classes, probably due to the arbitrary discretisation into eight classes, while it has been pointed that it is not that clear the class assignment at the transitions between structures and coils [24].

The saliency maps can be used as additional evidence for theories around protein secondary structure. For instance, one point of concern has been the inclusion of inputs with different nature: the one-hot amino-acid along the pssm dense vector. Some authors [8, 7] embedded the one-hot vector into a denser space, reporting a small marginal improvement in accuracy (0.5% and 0.4%, respectively). [25] reported a 2% Q3 improvement by not including the one-hot amino-acids at all. Saliency maps provide with information of the importance that different parts of the input have, so by direct comparison of both kinds of inputs can be made by comparing their associated saliency values. To do so, saliency map is split in two halves, corresponding to amino-acid and pssm, and all the values of each half are summed up in absolute value to form a single saliency score. The comparison of such scores for all positions in the dataset is made in Figure 3, revealing that in the great majority of positions the pssm inputs had four times or more relevance for making the classification decision, with around half of them having seven times or more relevance. We further validate these findings by training a second network that uses the pssm input but ignores the one-hot amino-acids, all the other things remaining equal. This network reaches an accuracy of 67.58% on the test set, just 0.2% lower than the original one.

Figure 4 includes the saliency profiles of the average behaviour in each class. The construction of each class profile has been made as follows. For each sequence position belonging to the class that was predicted right, the 42x19 slice of the saliency map corresponding to the class is extracted and summed up over the feature dimension, leading to a profile vector of size 19. The figure shows the average of the all the profiles for each class. Sequences of both the training and test set were used for this result. The figure reveals what the system is capturing for each class. For the α -helices, H holds some periodicity on the even positions and large asymmetry, while G is rather centred on the positions 0 and -1, which

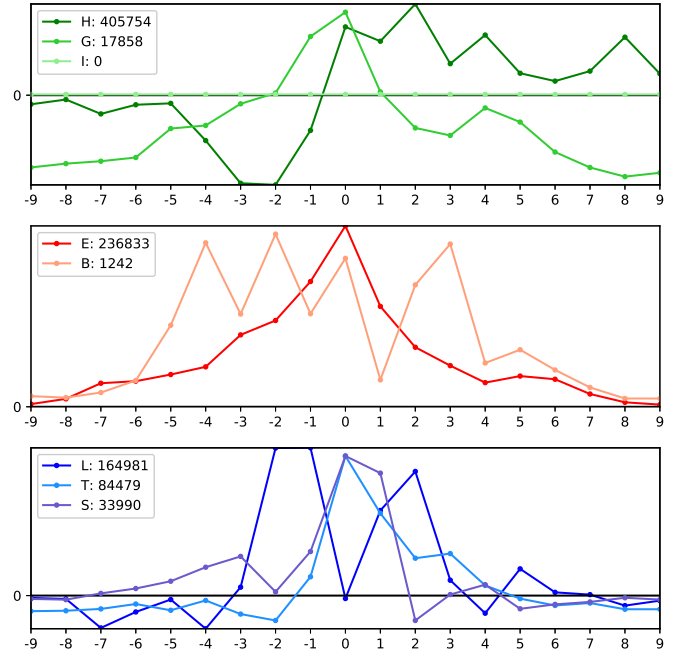


Fig. 4. Average saliency profiles for the eight classes. On top, the three helix classes; in the middle, the two β classes; below, the three coil classes. The legends show the amount of profiles averaged over for each class.)

relates to the fact that the class G correspond to smaller types of helices. The periodicity goes in line with the structure of α -helices, which are a succession of turns. The asymmetry can point to a strong dependency on the posterior amino-acids when the protein chain is built. The β classes are influenced by further positions (± 6), as they extend more and form bigger groups of amino-acids. While the β -strands (E) have a smooth decay, the β -bridges have a stronger periodicity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

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