

Research Statement

Avi Srivastava / May 3, 2019

My main research interest is in contributing to a better understanding of dynamic gene expression landscapes through efficient algorithms and statistical inference approaches that account for uncertainty. This broad goal has led me into the field of Computational Biology and the study of RNA Sequencing (RNA-seq) experiments, in particular.

Published Research

RNA-seq technologies are evolving rapidly, and with them, the requirement for fast and accurate tools to determine and analyze the origin of reads in the generated data. The first step of many RNA-seq analyses requires us to solve the problem of read-alignment. When reads are aligned to a collection of reference sequences that share a substantial amount of sub-sequence (near or exact repeats), a single read can have many potential alignments, and considering all such alignment can be crucial for downstream analysis.

I introduced a novel concept, quasi-mapping, and an efficient algorithm implementing this approach called RapMap which maps RNA-seq reads (sequences) to the reference sequence(s) (transcriptome). RapMap is capable of *mapping* sequencing reads to a target transcriptome substantially faster than existing alignment tools. The algorithm I employed to implement quasi-mapping uses several efficient data structures and takes advantage of the special structure of shared sequence prevalent in transcriptomes to rapidly provide highly-accurate mapping information. RapMap is well accepted by community, to date, the manuscript has been downloaded ~9k times and cited 44 times [10].

While bulk RNA-seq is an established method to perform genome-wide quantification of gene expressions[9], bulk experiments average-out the expression patterns of individual cells (or cell types) across millions of cells, losing cell-level heterogeneity which is crucial to understand the gene expression landscape. Moreover, quantification tools for bulk RNA-seq cannot be directly used for droplet based single cell RNA-seq (dscRNA-seq) data[2, 4, 7]. I introduced alevin, a fast end-to-end pipeline to process dscRNA-seq data, addressing the inherent bias in existing tools which discard gene-ambiguous reads and improving the accuracy of gene abundance estimates. Alevin is considerably faster, typically 8 times faster, than existing gene-quantification approaches, while also using less memory.

Future Research

Given the success of both RapMap and alevin, I continued pursuing this line of research, and collaborated to develop other downstream tools [1, 3, 5, 6, 8]. In addition, I plan to generalize both methods to make them more robust and extend their capabilities. As quasi-mapping is a useful novel concept, but it trades-off some accuracy for speed. This is often ok for typical RNA-seq experiments. However, it loses accuracy in *relatively* complex datasets. In an ongoing work, I have already optimized RapMap to provide an efficient, dynamic (dataset dependent) speed / accuracy tradeoff. Moreover, as alevin internally uses RapMap for transcriptome mapping, I believe improvement

in mapping quality will be directly reflected in the accuracy of alevin, while also improving the performance of other downstream tools.

References

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