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Authors

- **John Doe**
  XXXX-XXXX-XXXX-XXXX · johndoe · johndoe
  Department of Something, University of Whatever · Funded by Grant XXXXXXXX

- **Jane Roe**
  XXXX-XXXX-XXXX-XXXX · janeroe
  Department of Something, University of Whatever; Department of Whatever, University of Something

Abstract

Introduction

Although cancer can be initiated and driven by many different genetic alterations, these tend to converge on a limited number of pathways or signaling processes [1]. A comprehensive understanding of how diverse genetic alterations perturb these central pathways is vital to precision medicine and biomarker identification efforts, as driver mutation status alone confers limited prognostic information [2,3]. While many methods exist to distinguish driver mutations from passenger mutations based on genomic sequence characteristics [4,5,6], until recently it has been a challenge to connect driver mutations to downstream changes in gene expression and cellular function within individual tumor samples.

The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Pan-Cancer Atlas provides uniformly processed, multi-platform -omics measurements across tens of thousands of samples from 33 cancer types [7]. Enabled by this publicly available data, a growing body of work on linking the presence of driving genetic alterations in cancer to downstream gene expression changes has emerged. Recent studies have considered Ras pathway alteration status in colorectal cancer [8], alteration status across many cancer types in Ras genes [9,10], TP53 [11], and PIK3CA [12], and alteration status across cancer types in frequently mutated genes [13]. More broadly, other groups have drawn on similar ideas to distinguish between the functional effects of different alterations in the same driver gene [14], to link alterations with similar gene expression signatures within cancer types [15], and to identify trans-acting expression quantitative trait loci (trans-eQTLs) in germline genetic studies [16].

These studies share a common thread: they each combine genomic (point mutation and copy number variation) data with transcriptomic (RNA sequencing) data within samples to interrogate the functional effects of genetic variation. RNA sequencing is ubiquitous and cheap, and its experimental and computational methods are relatively mature, making it a vital tool for generating insight into cancer pathology [17]. Some driver mutations, however, are known to act indirectly on gene expression through varying mechanisms. For example, oncogenic IDH1 and IDH2 mutations in glioma have been shown to interfere with histone demethylation, which results in increased DNA methylation and blocked cell differentiation [18,19]. Other genes implicated in aberrant DNA methylation in cancer include the TET family of genes [20] and SETD2 [21]. Certain driver mutations, such as those in DNA damage repair genes, may lead to detectable patterns of somatic mutation [22]. Additionally, correlation between gene expression and protein abundance in cancer cell lines is limited, and proteomics data could correspond more directly to certain cancer phenotypes and pathway perturbations [23]. In these contexts and others, integrating different data modalities or combining multiple data modalities could be more effective than relying solely on gene expression as a functional signature.

Here, we seek to compare -omics data types profiled in the TCGA Pan-Cancer Atlas for use as a multivariate functional readout of genetic alterations in cancer. We focus on DNA methylation (27K and 450K probe chips), reverse phase protein array (RPPA), and mutational signatures data [24] as alternative readouts. Prior studies have identified univariate correlations of CpG site methylation [25,26] and correlations of RPPA protein profiles [27] with the presence or absence of certain driver mutations. Other relevant past work includes linking point mutations and copy number variants (CNVs) with changes in methylation and expression at individual genes [28,29] and identifying functional modules that are perturbed by somatic mutations [30,31]. However, no direct comparison has been made between different data types for this application, particularly in the multivariate case where we consider changes to -omics-derived gene signatures rather than individual genes in isolation.

We select a wide-ranging collection of potential cancer drivers with varying functions and roles in cancer development [32]. We use mutation status in these genes as labels to train classifiers, using each of the data types listed as training data, in a pan-cancer setting; we follow similar methods to the elastic net logistic regression approach described in Way et al. 2018 [9] and Way et al. 2020 [13]. We show that although there is considerable predictive signal for many genes in each dataset relative to a random baseline, gene expression data tends to provide more effective predictions than the other data types in the vast majority of cases. In addition, we observe that combining data types into a single multi-omics model provides little, if any, performance benefit over the most performant model using a single data type. Our results will help to inform the design of future functional genomics studies in cancer, suggesting that RNA sequencing can serve as a broadly effective first-line readout for a variety of genetic alterations.

Methods

Mutation data download and preprocessing

To generate binary mutated/non-mutated gene labels for our machine learning model, we used mutation calls for TCGA samples from MC3 [33] and copy number threshold calls from GISTIC2.0 [34]. MC3 mutation calls were downloaded from the Genome Data Commons (GDC) of the National Cancer Institute, at `https://gdc.cancer.gov/about-data/publications/pancanatlas`. Copy number threshold calls are from an older version of PanCanAtlas, and are available here: `https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/TCGA_PanCanAtlas_Copy_Number_Data/6144122`. We removed hypermutated samples (defined as five or more standard deviations above the mean non-silent somatic mutation count) from our dataset to reduce the number of false positives (i.e., non-driver mutations). In total, this resulted in 9,074 TCGA samples with mutation and copy number data. Any sample with a non-silent somatic variant in the target gene was included in the positive set. We also included copy number gains in the target gene for oncogenes, and copy number losses in the target gene for tumor suppressor genes, in the positive set; all remaining samples were considered negative for mutation in the target gene.

Omics data download and preprocessing

RNA sequencing, 27K and 450K methylation array, and RPPA datasets for TCGA samples were all downloaded from GDC, at the same link provided above. Mutational signatures information for TCGA samples with whole-exome sequencing data was downloaded from the International Cancer Genome Consortium (ICGC) data portal, at `https://dcc.icgc.org/releases/PCAWG/mutational_signatures/Signatures_in_Samples/SP_Signatures_in_Samples`. For our experiments, we used only the “single base signature” (SBS) mutational signatures, generated in [24]. We standardized (took z-scores of) each column of RNA sequencing and RPPA data; methylation data and mutational signatures data were left untransformed (beta values and mutation counts respectively), except in multi-omics experiments where all data types were standardized. For the RNA sequencing dataset, we used only the top 8,000 gene features by mean absolute deviation as predictors in our models, except in multi-omics experiments where all 15,639 genes were used.

In order to remove missing values from the methylation datasets, we removed the 10 samples with the most missing values, then performed mean imputation for probes with 1 or 2 values missing. All probes with missing values remaining after sample filtering and imputation were dropped from the analysis. This left us with 20,040 CpG probes in the 27K methylation dataset, and 370,961 CpG probes in the 450K methylation dataset. For experiments where “raw” methylation data was used, we used the top 100,000 probes in the 450K dataset by mean absolute deviation for computational efficiency, and we used all of the 20,040 probes in the 27K dataset. For experiments where “compressed”

methylation data was used, we used principal component analysis (PCA), as implemented in the `scikit-learn` Python library [35], to extract the top 5,000 principal components from the methylation datasets. We initially applied the beta-mixture quantile normalization (BMIQ) method [36] to correct for variability in signal intensity between type I and type II probes, but we observed that this had no effect on our results. We report uncorrected results in the main paper for simplicity.

To make a fair comparison in each of the experiments displayed in the results, we used the intersection of TCGA samples having measurements for all of the datasets being compared in that experiment. This resulted in 3 distinct sets of samples: 9,074 samples shared between {expression, mutation} data, 7,981 samples shared between {expression, mutation, 27K methylation, 450K methylation}, and 5,282 samples shared between {expression, mutation, 27K methylation, 450K methylation, RPPA, mutational signatures}. When we dropped samples between experiments as progressively more data types were added, we observed that the dropped samples had approximately the same cancer type proportions as the dataset as a whole. In other words, samples that were profiled for one data type but not another did not tend to come exclusively from one or a few cancer types. Exceptions included acute myeloid leukemia (LAML) which had no samples profiled in the RPPA data, and ovarian cancer (OV) which had only 8 samples with 450K methylation data. More detailed information on cancer type proportions profiled for each data type is provided in (the supplement).

Training classifiers to detect cancer mutations

We trained logistic regression classifiers to predict whether or not a given sample has a mutational event in a given target gene, using data from various -omics datasets as explanatory variables. We explored mutation prediction from gene expression alone using 3 gene sets of equal size: a cancer-related gene dataset of 124 genes described in Vogelstein et al. 2013 [32], the most mutated genes in TCGA in descending order, and a set of random genes with mutations profiled by MC3. For each target gene, in order to ensure that the training dataset was reasonably balanced (i.e. that there would be enough mutated samples to train a classifier), we included only cancer types with at least 15 mutated samples and at least 5% mutated samples. After filtering for sufficient mutated samples, 17 of the genes from the Vogelstein et al. gene set had no valid cancer types remaining, leaving 107 genes with one or more valid cancer types to use in further analyses. To match the size of this gene set, we took the 107 most frequently mutated genes in TCGA as quantified by MC3, all of which had at least one valid cancer type. For our random gene set, we first filtered to the set of all genes with 2 or more valid cancer types by the above criteria, then sampled 107 of these genes uniformly at random. Based on the results of the gene expression experiments, we used the Vogelstein et al. cancer gene set for all subsequent experiments comparing -omics data types.

Since our -omics datasets tend to have many dimensions and comparatively few samples, we applied an elastic net penalty to prevent overfitting [37], in line with the approach used in Way et al. 2018 [9]. Elastic net logistic regression finds the feature weights $\hat{w}$ solving the following optimization problem:

$$\hat{w} = \text{argmin}_w \, \ell(X, y; w) + \alpha\lambda||w||_1 + \frac{1}{2}\alpha(1-\lambda)||w||_2$$

where i denotes a given sample, X_i denote features (omics measurements) and $y_i \in \{0, 1\}$ denote labels (mutation presence/absence), and $\ell(\cdot)$ denotes the negative log-likelihood of the observed data given a choice of feature weights, e.g.

$$\ell(X, y; w) = -\sum_{i=1}^{n} y_i \log\left(\frac{1}{1+e^{-wX_i}}\right) + (1-y_i)\log\left(1 - \frac{1}{1+e^{-wX_i}}\right)$$

This optimization problem leaves two hyperparameters to select: α (controlling the tradeoff between the data likelihood and the penalty on large feature weight values), and λ (controlling the tradeoff

between the L1 penalty and L2 penalty on the weight values). Although the elastic net loss function does not have a closed form solution, it is convex, and iterative optimization algorithms are commonly used for finding reasonable solutions. For fixed values of α and λ, we solved for $\hat{w}$ using stochastic gradient descent, as implemented in `scikit-learn`'s `SGDClassifier` method.

Given weight values $\hat{w}$, it is straightforward to predict the probability of a positive label (mutation in the target gene) $P(y^* = 1 \mid X^*; \hat{w})$ for a test sample X^*:
\[P(y^{*} = 1 \mid X^{*}; \hat{w}) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\hat{w}^{\top}X^{*})}}\]

and the probability of no mutation in the target gene, $P(y^* = 0 \mid X^*; \hat{w})$, is given by (1 - the above quantity).

For each target gene, we evaluated model performance using 2 replicates of 4-fold cross-validation, where train and test splits were stratified by cancer type and sample type. That is, each training set/test set combination had equal proportions of each cancer type (BRCA, SKCM, COAD, etc) and each sample type (primary tumor, recurrent tumor, etc). To choose the elastic net hyperparameters, we used 3-fold nested cross-validation, with a grid search over the same hyperparameter ranges used in Way et al. 2020 [13]: λ = [0.15, 0.16, 0.2, 0.25, 0.3, 0.4] and α = [0.1, 0.13, 0.15, 0.2, 0.25, 0.3]. Using the grid search results, for each evaluation fold we selected the set of hyperparameters with the optimal area under the receiver-operator curve (AUROC), averaged over the three inner folds.

Evaluating mutation prediction classifiers

To quantify classification performance for a continuous or probabilistic output, such as that provided by logistic regression, the area under the receiver-operator curve (AUROC) [38] and the area under the precision-recall curve (AUPR) [39] metrics are frequently used. These metrics summarize performance across a variety of binary label thresholds, rather than requiring choice of a single threshold to determine positive or negative predictions. In the main text, we report results using AUPR, summarized using average precision. AUPR has been shown to distinguish between models more accurately than AUROC when there are few positively labeled samples [40,41]. As an additional correction for imbalanced labels, in many of the results in the main text we report the difference in AUPR between a classifier fit to true mutation labels, and a classifier fit to data where the mutation labels are randomly shuffled. In cases where mutation labels are highly imbalanced (very few mutated samples and many non-mutated samples), a classifier with shuffled labels may perform well simply by chance, e.g. by predicting the negative/non-mutated class for most samples.

Recall that for each target gene and each -omics dataset, we ran 2 replicates of 4-fold cross-validation, for a total of 8 performance results. To make a statistical comparison between two models using these performance distributions, we used paired-sample *t*-tests, where performance measurements derived from the same cross-validation fold are considered paired measurements. We used this approach to compare a model trained on true labels with a model trained on shuffled labels (addressing the question, "for the given gene using the given data type, can we predict mutation status better than random"), and to compare a model trained on data type A with a model trained on data type B (addressing the question, "for the given gene, can we make more effective mutation status predictions using data type A or data type B"). We corrected for multiple tests using a Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate correction. For all of our experiments, we set a conservative corrected *p*-value threshold of $\alpha = 0.001$; we were able to estimate the number of false positives by examining genes with better performance for shuffled mutation labels than true labels. We chose our threshold to ensure that none of these genes were considered significant, since we would never expect permuting labels to improve performance. However, our results were not sensitive to the choice of this threshold.

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