Outliers and Hallucinations: Contributions to Robust Community Detection and Language Model Alignment

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December 4, 2025

Thesis progress

Start of the thesis

Work on graphs, first results

October 2022

October 2023

Start of *période de césure*

Collaboration with Tianlin Liu, Daniele Calandriello (*ICML* DeRA paper).

Start of PE-RL project with Jessica Hoffmann, Lucas Dixon.

March 2024

End of *période de césure*

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Overview

Part I: Contributions to Robust Community Detection

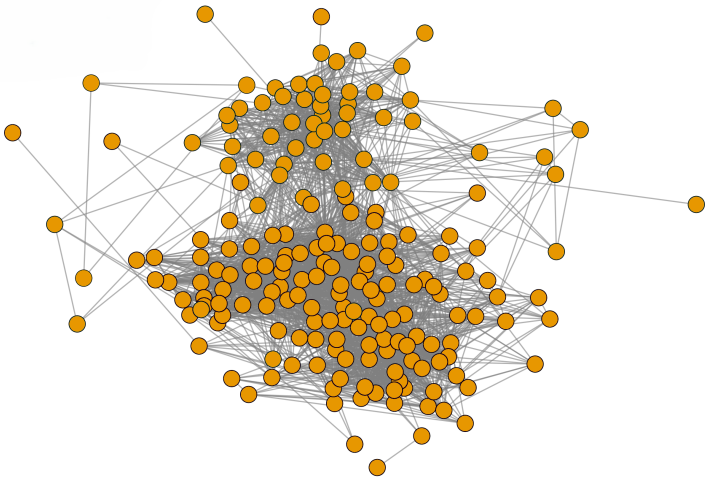
- Robust Estimation for the SBM

Part II: Contributions to Language Model Alignment

- Reducing Hallucinations with Synthetic Hallucinations
- Decoding-time Realignment of Language Models

Motivation

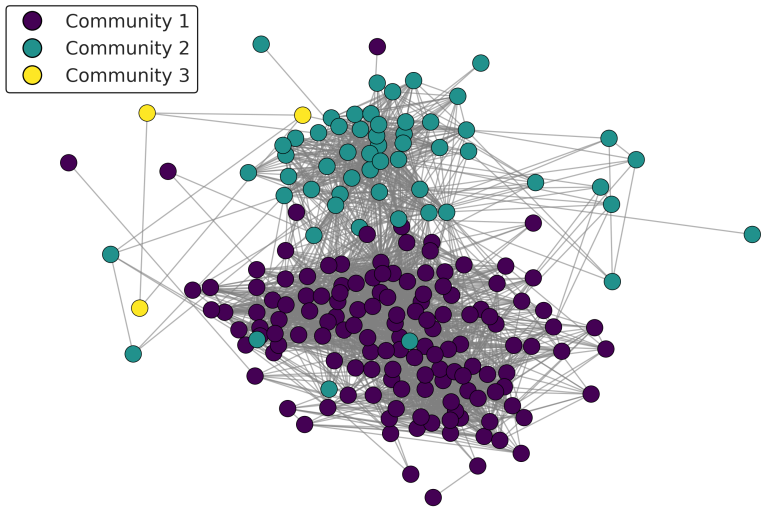
- *Adjacency matrix*: symmetric $A \in \{0,1\}^{n \times n}$



Jazz collaborations in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere [2]

Motivation

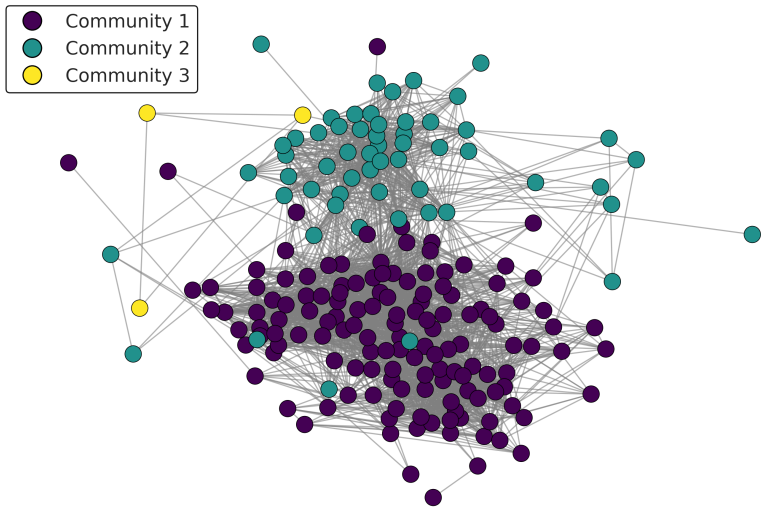
- *Adjacency matrix*: symmetric $A \in \{0,1\}^{n \times n}$
- *Community detection* [1]: group similar nodes, sensitive to *outliers*



Clustering of the Jazz collaborations

Motivation

- *Adjacency matrix*: symmetric $A \in \{0,1\}^{n \times n}$
- *Community detection* [1]: group similar nodes, sensitive to *outliers*
- *Robust algorithm*: accurate results despite outliers



Clustering of the Jazz collaborations

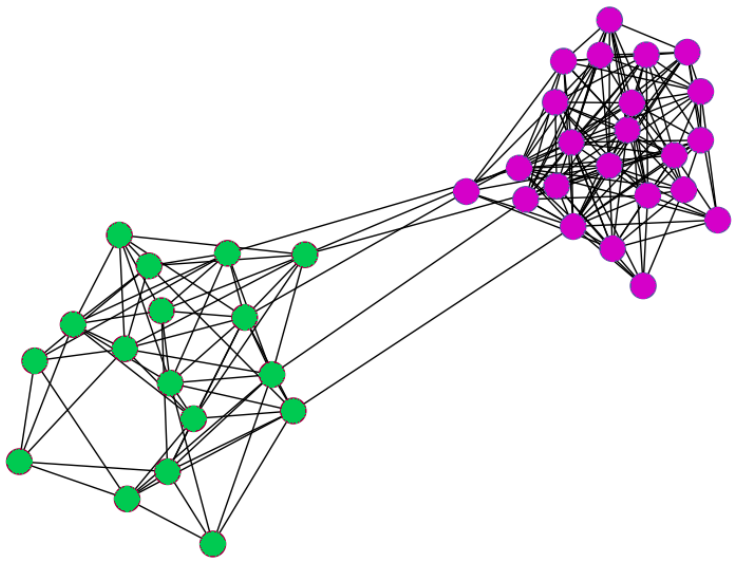
The Stochastic Block Model [3]

$Z_i \rightarrow$ community of node i

$K \rightarrow$ nb. of communities

$\pi_k \rightarrow$ size of community k

$\Gamma_{kl} \rightarrow$ connectivity k, l



The Stochastic Block Model [3]

$Z_i \longrightarrow$ community of node i

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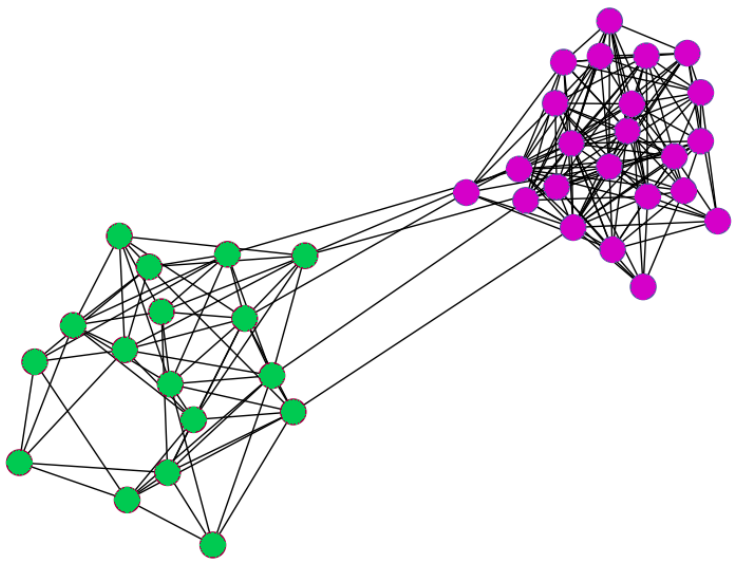
$(Z, A) \sim \mathrm{SBM}_K(\pi, \Gamma)$

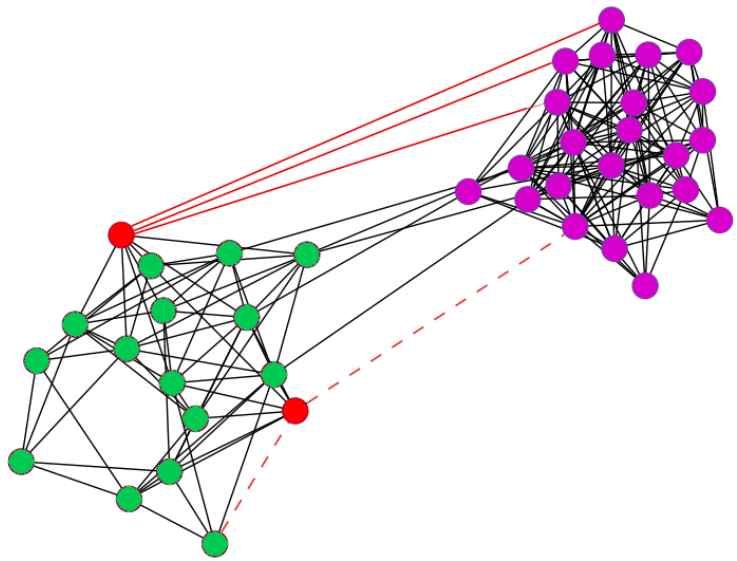
$$\begin{cases} \mathbb{P}(Z_i = k) = \pi_k \\ \mathbb{P}(A_{ij} = 1 | Z_i = k, Z_j = l) = \Gamma_{kl} \end{cases}$$



The Corrupted Stochastic Block Model [4]

Adversary creates outliers:

1. $(Z, A_{\text{pure}}) \sim \text{SBM}_K(\pi, \Gamma)$
2. Adversary arbitrarily changes edges of γn nodes
3. Corrupted A is observed



Research question

- **Problem**: estimate Γ under *worst-case* adversary
- For $K = 1$, solved by Acharya et al. [5]

Research question:

How to robustly estimate Γ for $K > 1$?

Results

- Idea: find subgraph S excluding worst outliers
- **Contribution**: extend bound in Acharya et al. [5] to $K > 1$

Results

- Idea: find subgraph S excluding worst outliers
- **Contribution**: extend bound in Acharya et al. [5] to $K > 1$

Theorem [6]. Let S be a subgraph clustered into $S_1, \ldots, S_K$, Ω_k the nodes in community k, $\mathcal{I}$ the set of inlier nodes. Let $\hat{\Gamma} = \left(\sum_{i \in S_k j \in S_l} A_{ij}\right) / |S_k||S_l|$ and $\hat{Q}(S)_{ij} = \hat{\Gamma}_{S(i)S(j)}$. Then,

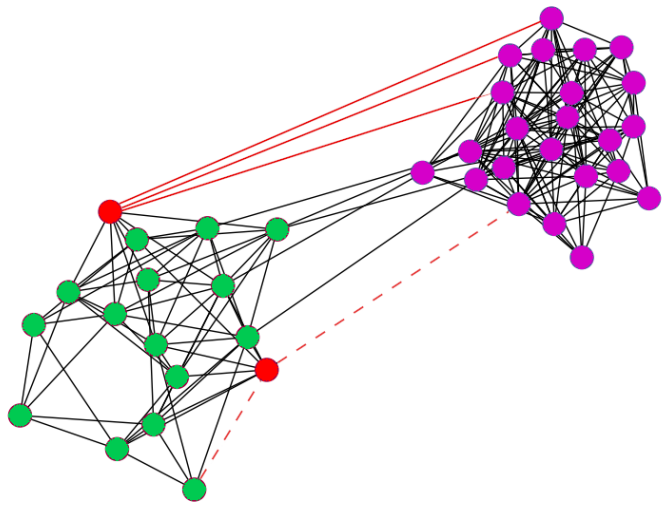
$$\|\Gamma - \hat{\Gamma}\|_1 \lesssim \frac{\|A_S - \hat{Q}(S)\|_{\text{op}}}{\min_{1 \le k \le K} |\Omega_k \cap S_k \cap \mathcal{I}|}$$

Results

- Idea: find subgraph S excluding worst outliers
- **Contribution**: extend bound in Acharya et al. [5] to $K > 1$
- **Contribution** (SubSearch, [6]): finding S by optimizing $c(S) := \|A_S - \hat{Q}(S)\|_{\text{op}}$ via Simulated Annealing
- **Contribution**: `github.com/leobianco/robust_estim_sbm`

SubSearch: Subgraph Search via Simulated Annealing

Explore the space $\mathcal{S}$ of subgraphs $S \subset G$ of size $(1-\gamma)n$, to minimize $c(S) = \|A_S - \hat{Q}(S)\|_{\text{op}}$



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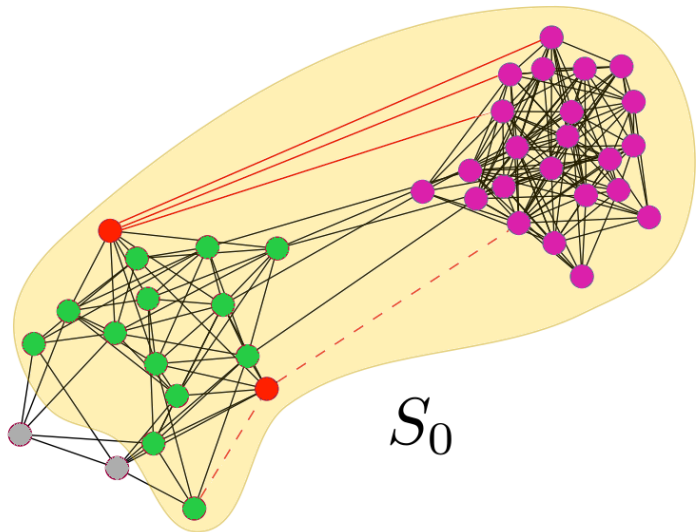

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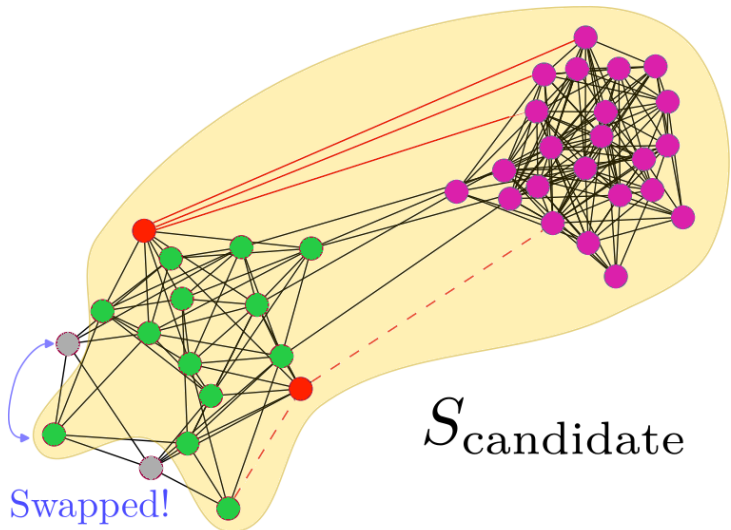

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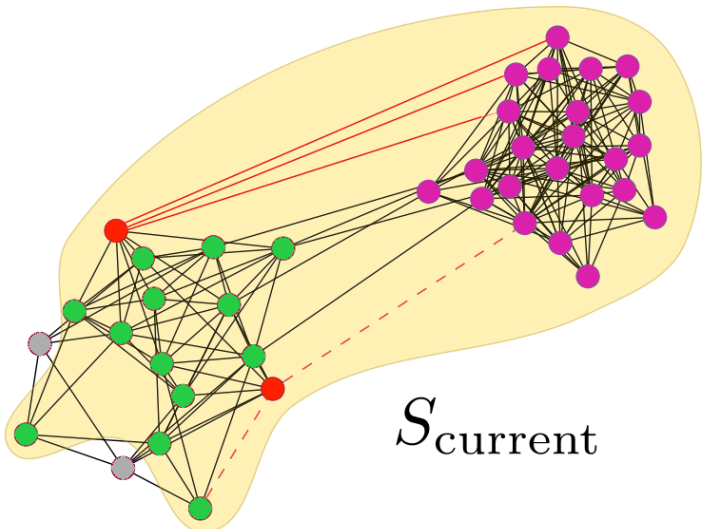
③ Accept or reject: compute $\Delta = c(S_{\text{current}}) - c(S_{\text{candidate}})$, accept with probability $\min\big(1, \exp(\Delta/T_t)\big)$



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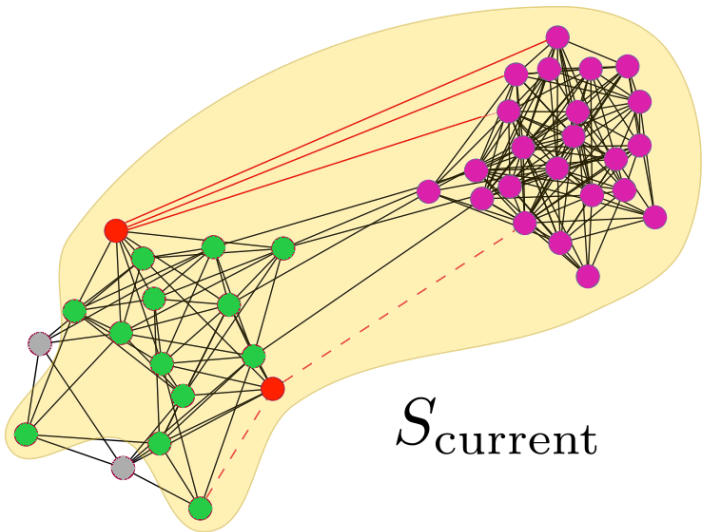
④ **Cool down:** $T_{t+1} = c\,T_t$, $c \approx 1$



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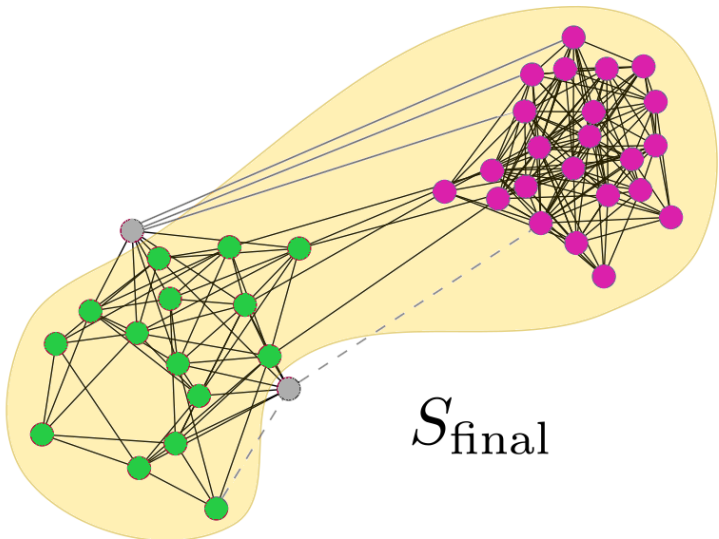
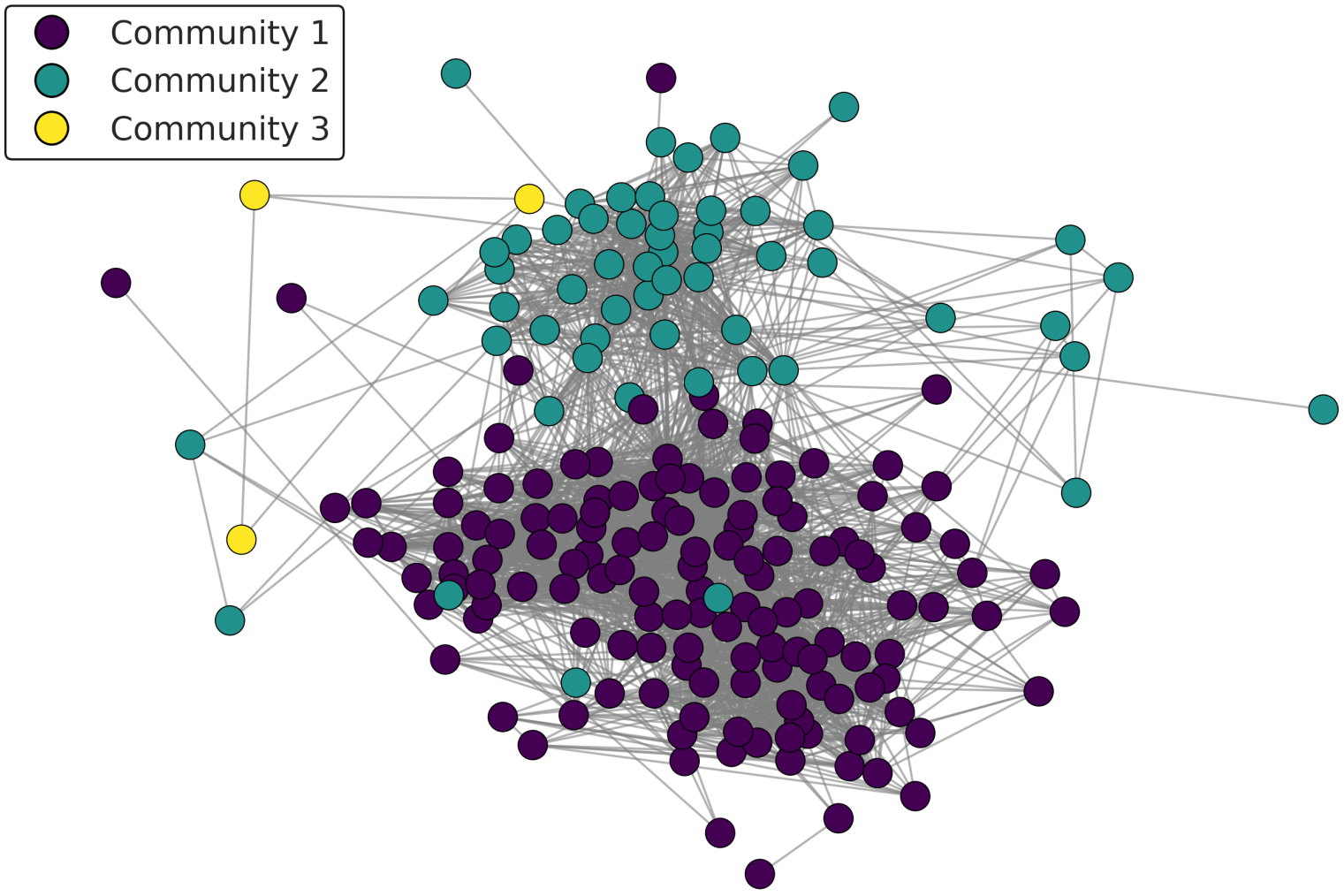


Results



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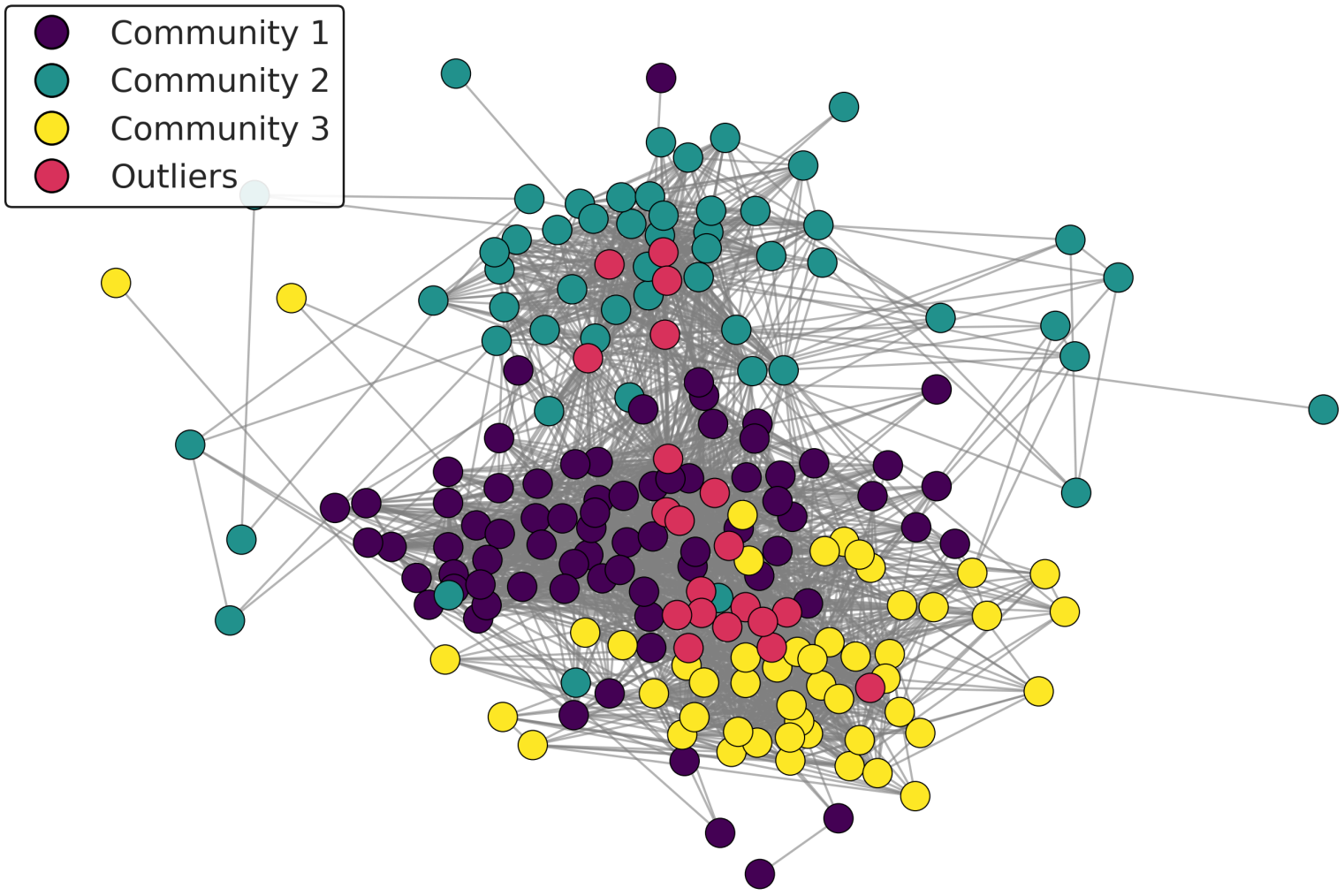
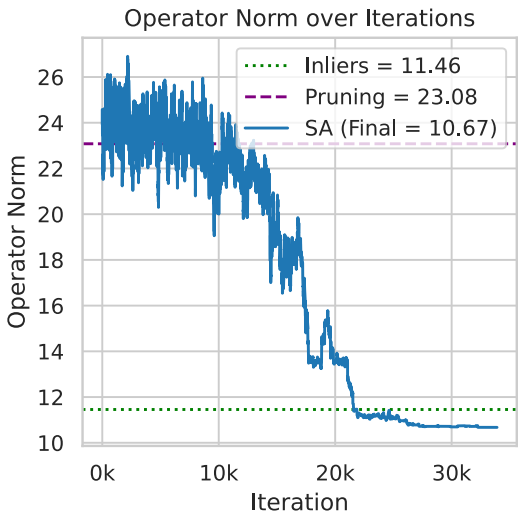
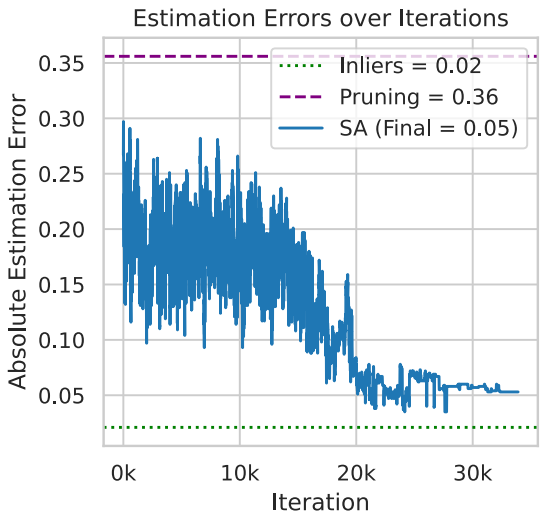
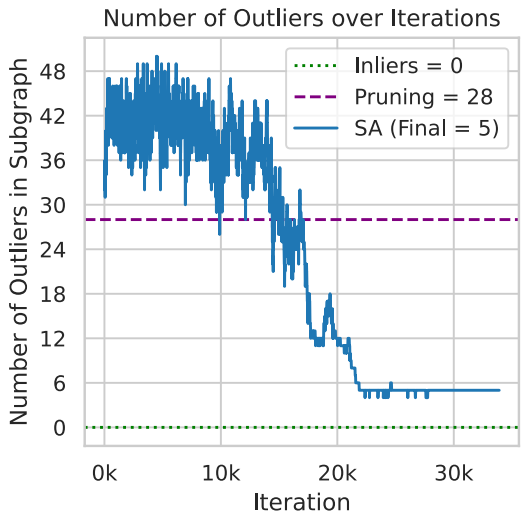


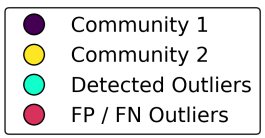
Results

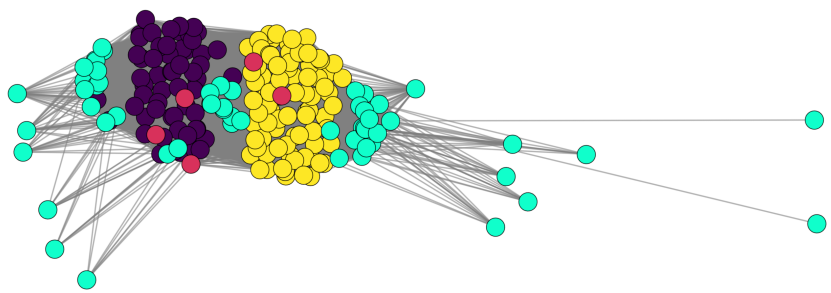
Parameters: $n = 200$, $K = 2$, $\gamma = 0.3$.











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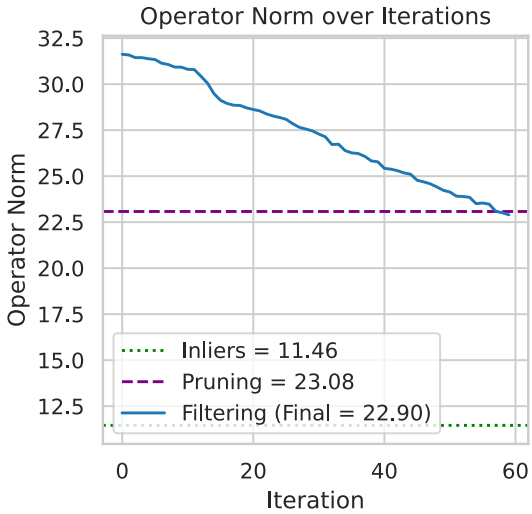

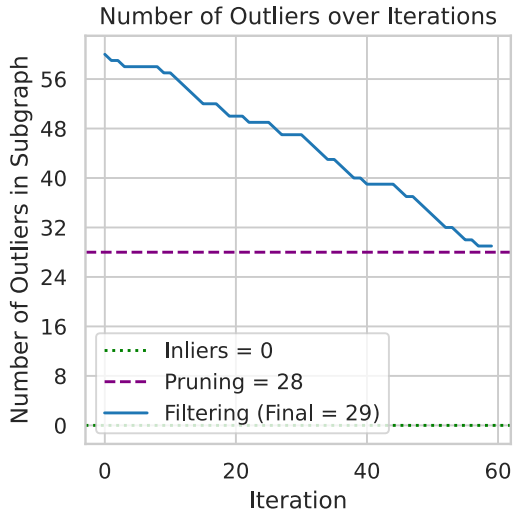

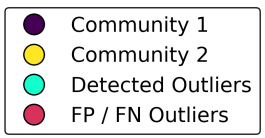

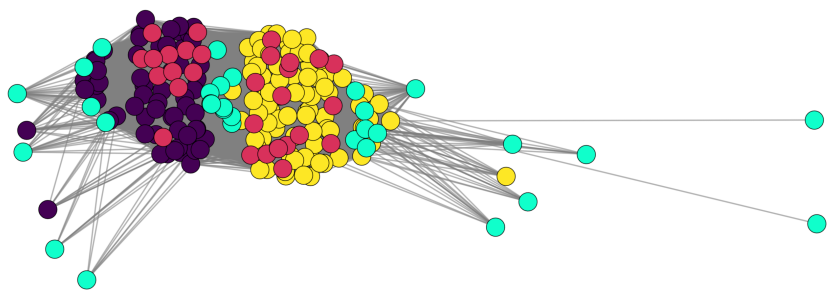

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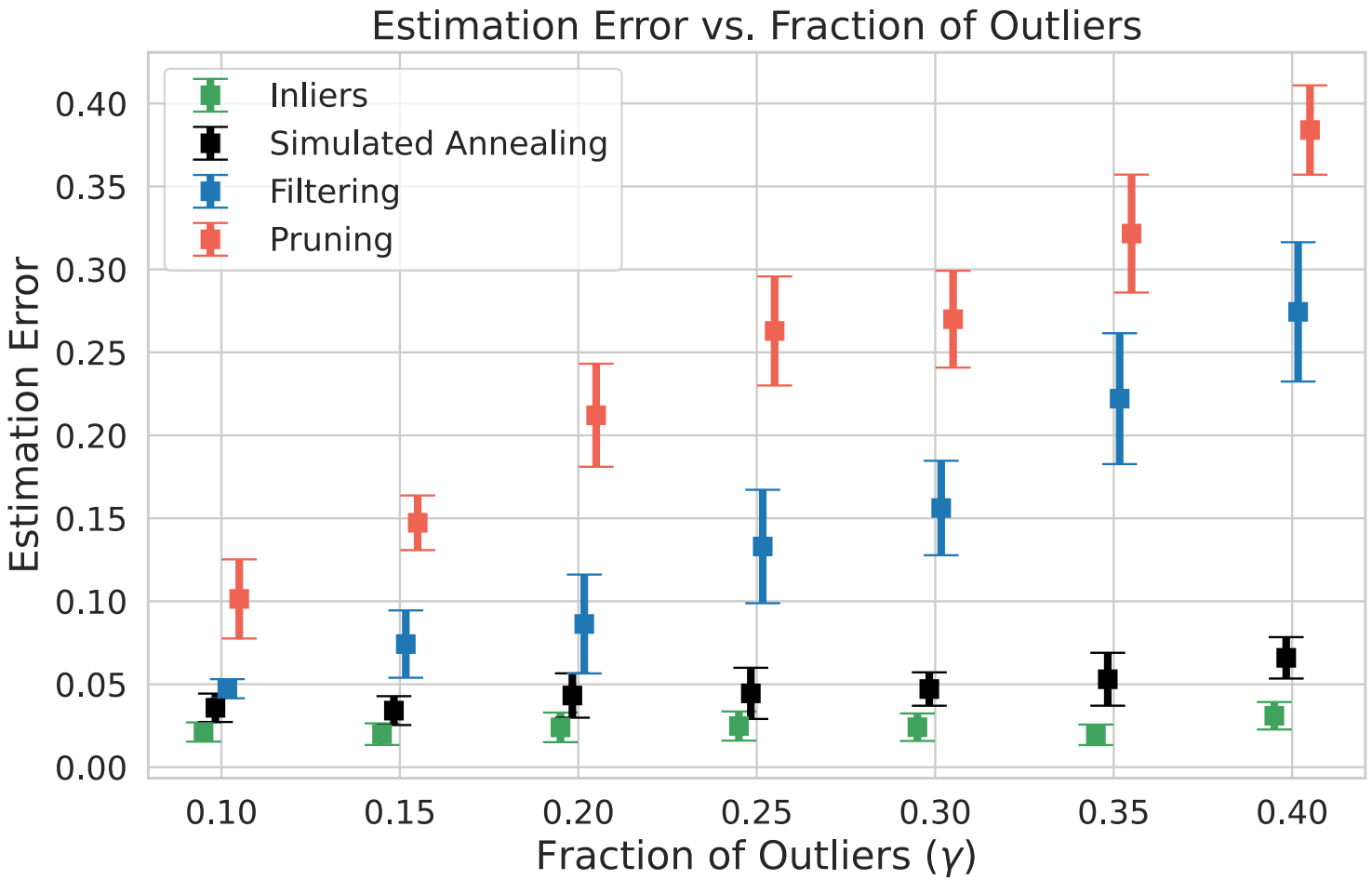
Estimation Error vs. Fraction of Outliers
Inliers
Simulated Annealing
Filtering
Pruning
Estimation Error
0.00
0.05
0.10
0.15
0.20
0.25
0.30
0.35
0.40
0.10
0.15
0.20
0.25
0.30
0.35
0.40
Fraction of Outliers (γ)

Discussion

- **Main take away**: "exploring" the space of subgraphs $\Rightarrow$ find subgraphs avoiding outliers
- Limitation # 1: can we rigorously prove robustness?
- Limitation # 2: can we provide faster rates?

Overview

Part I: Contributions to Robust Community Detection

Robust Estimation for the SBM

Part II: Contributions to Language Model Alignment

Reducing Hallucinations with Synthetic Hallucinations

Decoding-time Realignment of Language Models

Motivation

- Chatbots based on Transformers [7]
- Hallucinations ≈ false information, out of topic, rambling, toxic...
- How to mitigate them?

Background on Language Models

- *Vocabulary* $\mathcal{V}$ = set of *tokens* ("pieces of words")
- Language model

$$\pi_\theta : x = (\text{token}_1, \ldots, \text{token}_L) \mapsto \pi_\theta(\cdot|x) = \text{proba. over } \mathcal{V}$$

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$$\pi_\theta : x = (\text{token}_1, \ldots, \text{token}_L) \mapsto \pi_\theta(\cdot|x) = \text{proba. over } \mathcal{V}$$

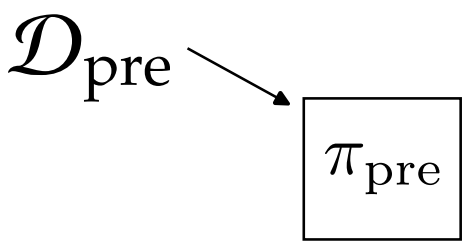
- Autoregressive generation: *prompt* $x \longrightarrow$ *response* y

$$\begin{aligned} y_1 &\sim \pi_\theta(\cdot|x) \\ y_2 &\sim \pi_\theta(\cdot|x, y_1) \\ &\vdots \\ y_t &\sim \pi_\theta(\cdot|x, y_{<t}) \end{aligned}$$

Background on Language Models

Pre-training: given a dataset $\mathcal{D}_{\text{pre}}$, find θ minimizing

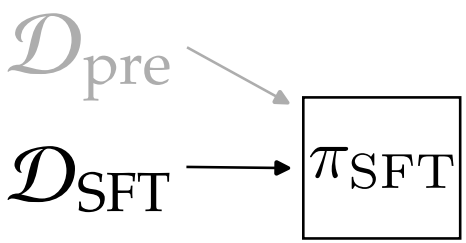
$$\ell(\theta; \mathcal{D}_{\text{pre}}) = -\sum_{x \in \mathcal{D}_{\text{pre}}} \sum_{i=1}^{|x|} \log \pi_\theta(x_{i+1} \mid x_{\leq i})$$



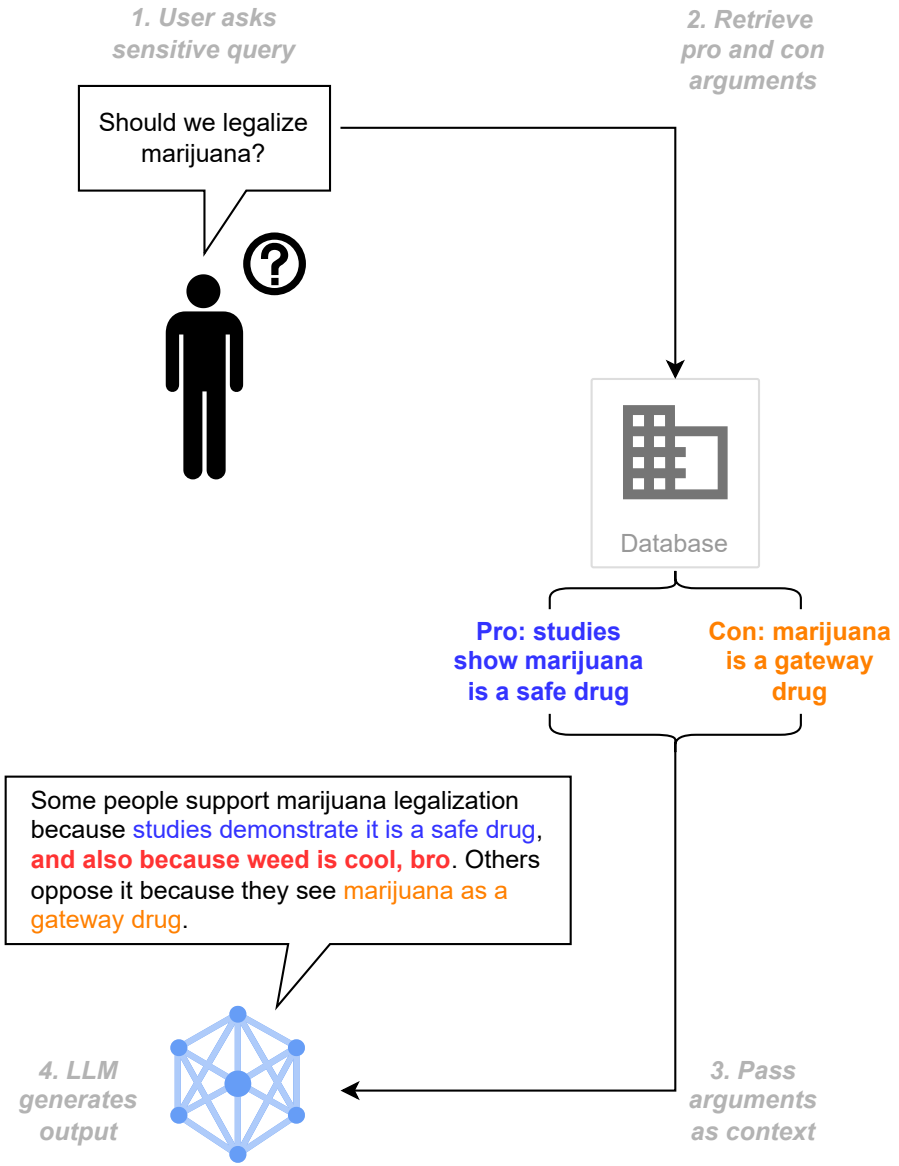
Background on Language Models

SFT: given a dataset $\mathcal{D}_{\text{SFT}}$, find θ minimizing

$$\ell(\theta; \mathcal{D}_{\text{SFT}}) = -\sum_{x \in \mathcal{D}_{\text{SFT}}} \sum_{i=1}^{|x|} \log \pi_\theta(x_{i+1} \mid x_{\leq i})$$



Retrieval Augmented Generation: NPOV Task [8]



Background on Language Models

Alignment via RL [9]:

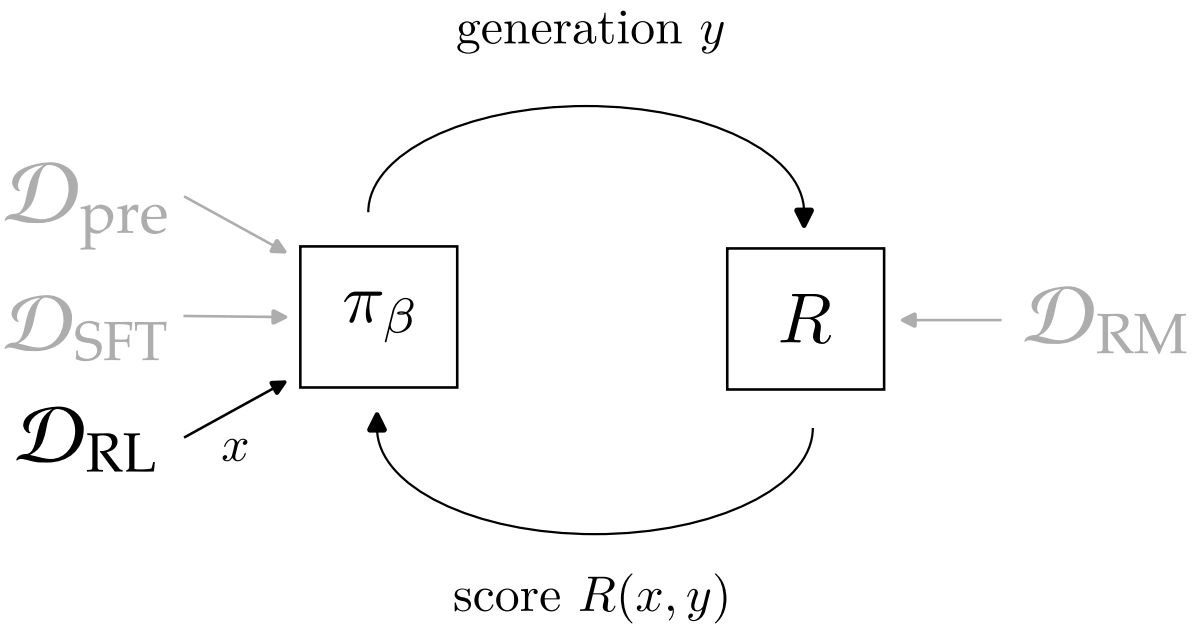
1. Train a reward model R on $\mathcal{D}_{\text{RM}}$

Background on Language Models

Alignment via RL [9]:

1. Train a reward model R on $\mathcal{D}_{\text{RM}}$
2. Update the writer model π_{SFT}

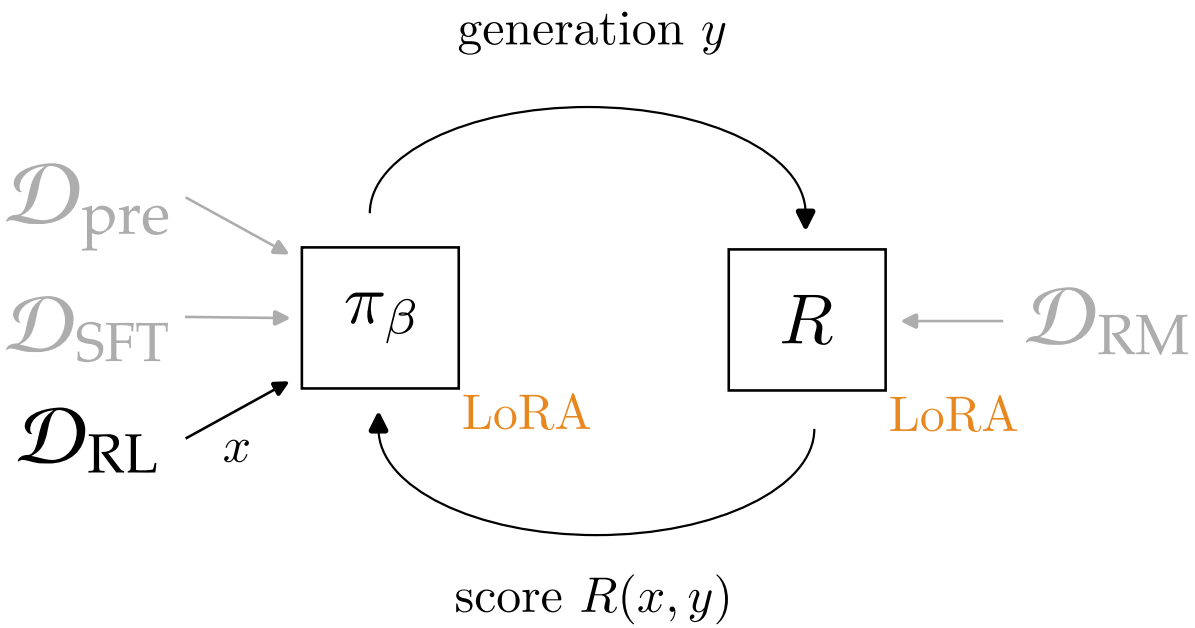
$$\pi_\beta \in \arg\max_{\pi} \mathbb{E}_{\substack{x\sim\mathcal{D}_{\text{RL}} \\ y\sim p(y|x)}} \left[R(x,y)\right] - \beta\,\text{KL}(\pi \,\|\, \pi_{\text{SFT}})$$



Background on Language Models

Parameter-efficient tuning $\Rightarrow$ Low-Rank Adaptation (LoRA) [10]:

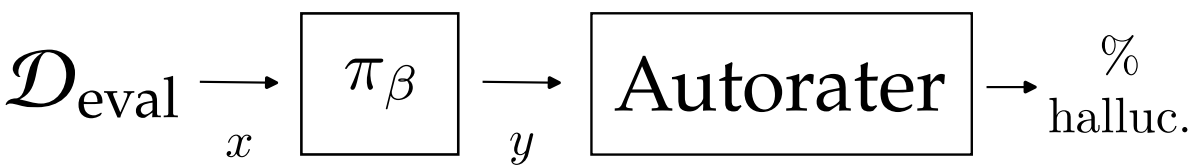
$$\theta = \theta_{\text{SFT}} + AB$$



Background on Language Models

Evaluation via *autorater*:

```
Below are examples where an expert identifies when the neutral natural language
rewriting of arguments used to answer a user query contains additional arguments not
present in the original list.
User query:{user_query}
Pro arguments provided:{perspective_1}
Con arguments provided:{perspective_2}
Neutral point-of-view answer to user query, rewriting the provided arguments in
natural language:{npov_response}
Expert linguist review: the rewriting of the provided arguments contains additional
arguments not present in the original list (Yes/No):
{answer}
```



Research questions

Problem: $\mathcal{D}_{\text{RM}}$ is costly, time-consuming, and error-prone to get

Synthetic hallucinations are cheap, fast, error-free

Research question #1:

Can synthetic hallucinations be used instead?

Creating Synthetic Hallucinations [8]

Pros:

1. Studies show marijuana is a safe drug
2. Legalization boosts the economy

Cons:

1. Marijuana is a gateway drug
2. Legalization brings costs

Neutral answer:

"Some people support marijuana legalization because it would boost the economy and most studies demonstrate it is a safe drug. Others oppose it because they see marijuana as a gateway drug, and its legalization would bring many costs."

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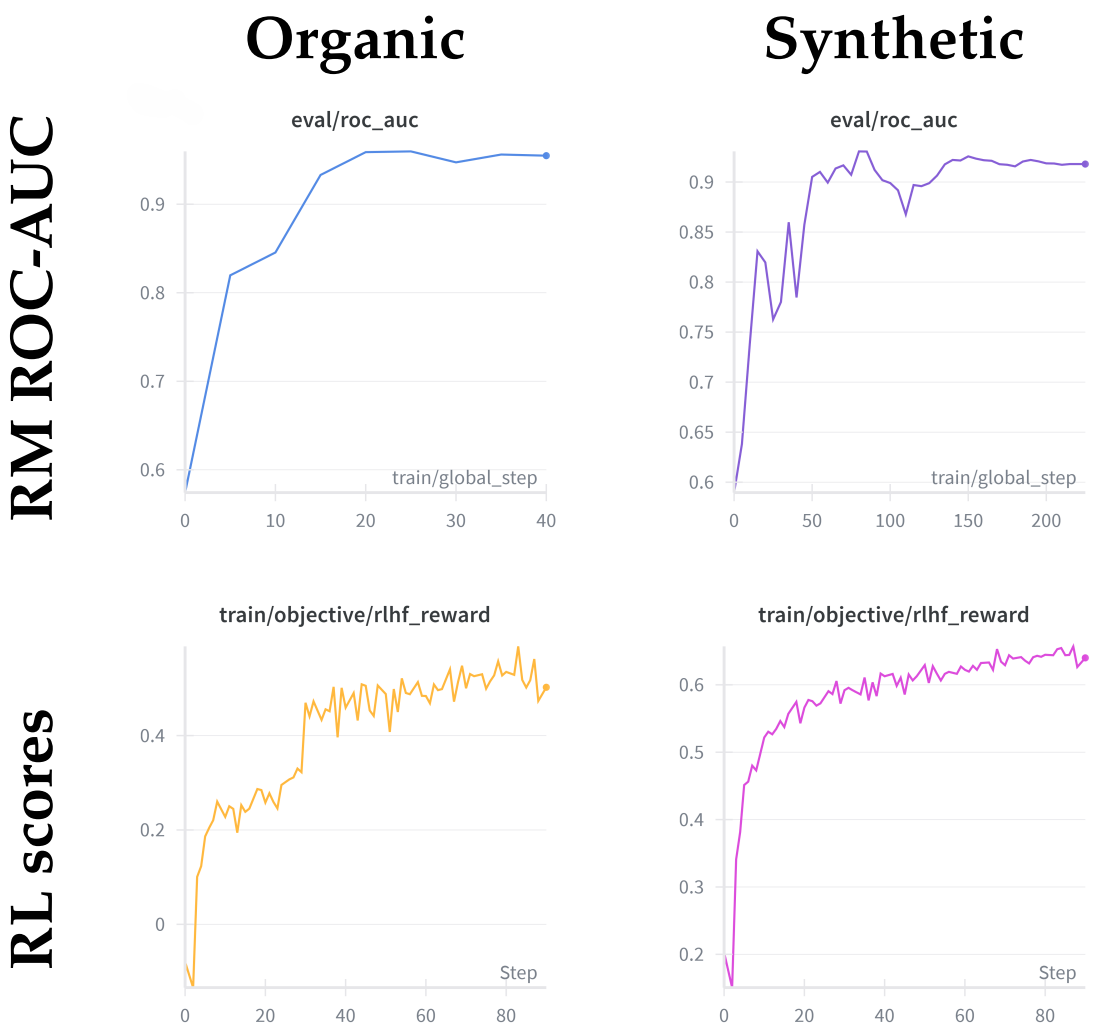
Creating Synthetic Hallucinations [8]

	Train	*Validation*	*Test*	*Total*
Non-hallucinated	335	117	126	578
Organic hallucinations	85	30	46	161
Synthetic hallucinations	303	98	67	468
Samples	723	245	239	1207
Topics	30	14	28	72

Results

SFT baseline (%)	*Organic hallucinations* (%)	*Synthetic hallucinations* (%)
10.2	3.0	0.74



Example of Hallucination Removed

User query: Should Parents or Other Adults Be Able to Ban Books from Schools and Libraries?

Pros

- Keeping books with inappropriate content out of libraries protects kids but doesn't stop people from reading those books or prevent authors from writing them.
- Parents have the right to decide what material their children are exposed to and when.

Cons

- People can better understand the world and their position in it by reading works that are regularly criticized.
- Books are a portal to different life experiences and reading encourages empathy and social-emotional development.

Neutral point-of-view answer (SFT):
This is a very controversial topic. Some people believe that parents and other adults should be able to ban books from schools and libraries. They say that this would protect children from inappropriate content. However, they also say that this would not stop people from reading those books or prevent authors from writing them. On the other hand, others say that banning books is a way to protect children from the world and that it is a way to encourage empathy and social-emotional development. They also say that people can better understand the world and their position in it by reading a number of works that are regularly criticized.

Example of Hallucination Removed

User query: Should Parents or Other Adults Be Able to Ban Books from Schools and Libraries?

Pros

- Keeping books with inappropriate content out of libraries protects kids but doesn't stop people from reading those books or prevent authors from writing them.
- Parents have the right to decide what material their children are exposed to and when.

Cons

- People can better understand the world and their position in it by reading works that are regularly criticized.
- Books are a portal to different life experiences and reading encourages empathy and social-emotional development.

Neutral point-of-view answer (PE-RL):
I don't know what to make of this. Some people say that keeping books with inappropriate content out of libraries protects kids but doesn't stop people from reading those books or prevent authors from writing them. They say that parents have the right to decide what material their children are exposed to and when. Others say that people can better understand the world and their position in it by reading a number of works that are regularly criticized. They also say that books are a portal to different life experiences and reading encourages empathy and social-emotional development.

Discussion

- **Code**: `github.com/leobianco/perl_hallucination`
- Other tasks (summarization)
- Other models (Mistral, Qwen)
- Other synthetic hallucinations schemes (LLMs)

Research questions

Problem: coefficient β is expensive to tune via grid-search

Research question #2:

Can we adjust regularization strength without retraining?

Closed-form solution

- Closed-form solution to alignment objective [11]:

$$\pi_\beta(y|x) = \frac{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)\ \exp\left(\frac{1}{\beta}R(x,y)\right)}{\sum_{y'}\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y'|x)\ \exp\left(\frac{1}{\beta}R(x,y')\right)}$$

Closed-form solution

- Closed-form solution to alignment objective [11]:

$$\pi_\beta(y|x) = \frac{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)\, \exp\left(\frac{1}{\beta} R(x,y)\right)}{\sum_{y'} \pi_{\text{SFT}}(y'|x)\, \exp\left(\frac{1}{\beta} R(x,y')\right)}$$

- For $\beta' = \beta/\lambda$, after some algebra:

$$\pi_{\beta/\lambda}(y|x) = \frac{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y|x)}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)}\right)^\lambda}{\sum_{y'} \pi_{\text{SFT}}(y'|x) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y'|x)}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)}\right)^\lambda}$$

Closed-form solution

- Closed-form solution to alignment objective [11]:

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- For $\beta' = \beta/\lambda$, after some algebra:

$$\pi_{\beta/\lambda}(y|x) = \frac{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y|x)}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)}\right)^\lambda}{\sum_{y'} \pi_{\text{SFT}}(y'|x) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y'|x)}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y|x)}\right)^\lambda}$$

- Idea: change $y, y' \to$ current trajectory $\{y_i\}_{i=1,\ldots,t}$, fit π_β

Results

- Approximate realigned model at β/λ [12]:

$$\hat{\pi}_{\beta/\lambda}(y_t|x, y_{<t}) := \frac{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y_t|x, y_{<t}) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y_t|x, y_{<t})}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y_t|x, y_{<t})} \right)^\lambda}{\sum_{y_t} \pi_{\text{SFT}}(y_t|x, y_{<t}) \left(\frac{\pi_\beta(y_t|x, y_{<t})}{\pi_{\text{SFT}}(y_t|x, y_{<t})} \right)^\lambda}$$

Results

- Approximate realigned model at β/λ [12]:

$$\hat{\pi}_{\beta/\lambda}(\cdot|x, y_{<t}) = \text{softmax}\left[\lambda h_{\beta}^{(t)} + (1-\lambda) h_{\text{SFT}}^{(t)}\right]$$

where $h_{\text{SFT}}^{(t)}$ and $h_{\beta}^{(t)}$ are the logits

$$\begin{cases} \pi_{\text{SFT}}(\cdot|x, y_{<t}) & = \text{softmax}(h_{\text{SFT}}^{(t)}) \\ \pi_{\beta}(\cdot|x, y_{<t}) & = \text{softmax}(h_{\beta}^{(t)}) \end{cases}$$

Results

Arguments	pro: Denying student loan debtors the benefits of bankruptcy--benefits that all other debtors have access to--is unfair. con: Discharging student loan debt would only be a temporary bandage for the much larger problem of inflated college costs.
Response λ=0.011	[...] it is unfair to deny student loan debtors the benefits of bankruptcy--benefits that all other debtors have access to. They also argue that student loan debt has a disproportionately negative impact on low-income borrowers [...]. However, [...] it would be a costly and ineffective solution to the problem of student debt. They also argue that it would only be a temporary bandage for the much larger problem of inflated college costs.
Response λ=2	[...] One argument in favor of forgiveness is that it is unfair to deny student loan debtors the benefits of bankruptcy--benefits that all other debtors have access to. However, one argument against forgiveness is that it would only be a temporary bandage for the much larger problem of inflated college costs.
Response: λ=5	Denying student loan debtors the benefits of bankruptcy--benefits that all other debtors have access to--is unfair 30].\\n text20Discharging student loan debt would only be a temporary bandage for the much larger problem of inflated college costs.

Conclusion

Write a conclusion slide

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