

Learning Structural Semantics for the Web

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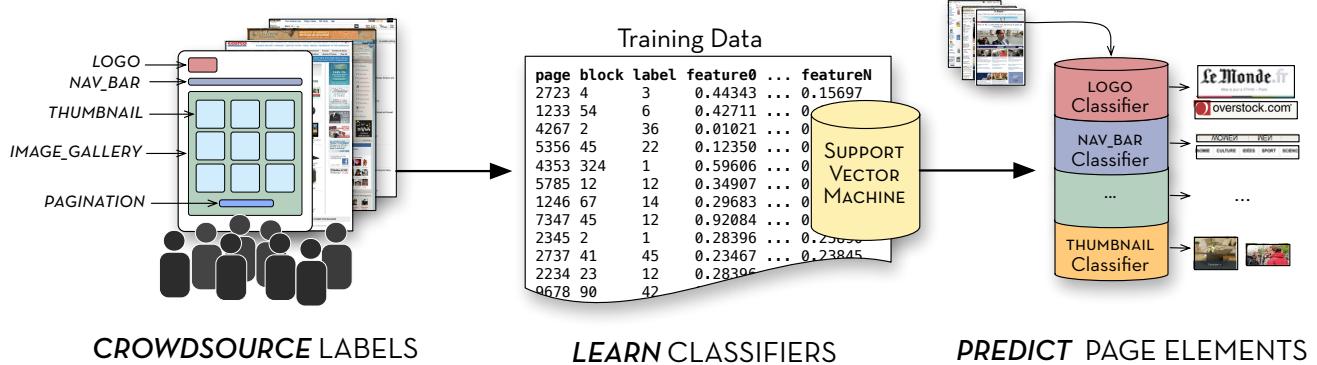


Figure 1. The pipeline for learning structural semantic classifiers for the Web. First, a large set of labeled page elements are collected from online workers. Next, these labels are used to train a set of regularized support vector classification SVMs. These classifiers are then used to identify semantic elements in new pages.

ABSTRACT

Researchers have long envisioned a Semantic Web, where unstructured Web content is replaced by documents with rich semantic annotations. Unfortunately, this vision has been hampered by the difficulty of acquiring semantic metadata for Web pages. This paper introduces a method for automatically "semantifying" structural page elements: using machine learning to train classifiers that can be applied in a post-hoc fashion. We focus on one popular class of semantic identifiers: those concerned with the *structure*—or information architecture—of a page. To determine the set of structural semantics to learn and to collect training data for the learning, we gather a large corpus of labeled page elements from a set of online workers. We discuss the results from this collection and demonstrate that our classifiers learn structural semantics in a general way.

Author Keywords

information architecture, structural semantics, semantic web

ACM Classification Keywords

H.4 Information Systems Applications: Miscellaneous

General Terms

Management, Design

INTRODUCTION

The Web is home to a massive, diverse repository of knowledge that is continuously expanding. With billions of extant pages, information abounds, but finding, aggregating, and synthesizing information relevant to a particular task remains a difficult and time-consuming problem. One reason for this difficulty is that Web content is largely *unstructured* [11]. Although Web formats provide rich presentation semantics for displaying Web data, they typically offer little support for other kinds of automated processing. This desire for flexible reuse of Web information has engendered a vision of a Semantic Web, where documents are annotated in a way that allows machines to “understand” Web content and respond to complex human requests based on their meaning [2].

While information extraction has traditionally targeted textual information, some recent attempts to semantify the Web have focused on page *structure* rather than *content*. In HTML 5, the World Wide Web Consortium added semantic tags (e.g. <ARTICLE>, <NAV>, <FIGURE>, <SUMMARY>, etc.) to help developers describe the information architecture of pages [16, 9]. These structural semantics are a small step on the road to a semantic “web of data” [17], aiding applications like search [7], retargeting [13], remixing [4], and user interface enhancement [19].

Relying on Web designers to annotate pages with semantic markup, however, is problematic. Developers, many of whom are primarily concerned with how their Web content is displayed rather than how easily it can be reused, lack strong incentives to invest time and effort augmenting pages with tags that do not produce presentational benefits. As semantic specifications evolve, pages must be continually re-

engineered even if their content remains unchanged. Furthermore, there is no universal consensus about the appropriate range and specificity of semantic terms to use. An alternative strategy is to allow end-users to add personal semantics to page data on a case-by-case basis [11, 10], but these manual techniques are difficult to scale to the whole Web.

This paper explores a different tactic for adding structural semantics to Web pages: learning classifiers for page elements from data. With accurate semantic classifiers, pages could be semantified automatically, in a post-hoc fashion, decoupled from the design and authoring process [21]. To this end, we present a classification method based on support vector machines [6], trained on a large collection of human-labeled page elements and employing a feature space comprised of visual, structural, and render-time page properties (Figure 1).

Although some approaches to adding post hoc semantics are domain-specific and/or make assumptions about the layout of Web documents, we aim to use a general set of semantic terms to describe structural elements across a wide range of pages, and our classifiers make no assumptions about page structure. As a result they can be applied to any HTML page that can be loaded and displayed in a browser.

To identify the set of structural semantics to learn, we take a crowdsourced approach. While the W3C, when selecting semantic tags to add to HTML 5, focused on how content *producers* view the information architecture of pages [14], we turn our attention to content *consumers* and the way they describe structural semantics. We recruited 400 participants on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk [1], collecting more than 21,000 semantic labels over a corpus of over 1400 Web pages. We use these labels to determine the set of classifiers and provide training data for the learning.

The paper describes the online label collection study and its results and demonstrates that SVM-based classifiers can produce prediction accuracies as high as 94.7

CROWDSOURCED LABEL COLLECTION

To drive the development of semantic classifiers, we collected a set of labeled page elements in an online study. We recruited 400 US-based workers from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to apply more than 21,000 labels across nearly 1500 Web pages. Every participant applied semantic labels to at least ten elements on each of five pages. The pages used in

the study were drawn from the Webzeitgeist design repository [12], which provides visual segmentations and page features for more than 100,000 Web pages.

The label collection process comprised two phases: a focused phase, and a broad phase. In the focused phase, we hand-selected fifty pages from ten popular site genres that were adapted from [8]: e-commerce, news, community, informational, corporate, small company, blog, personal, Web service, and Web resource. A hundred participants each labeled ten of these pages, producing 6351 labels and ensuring that many page elements were labeled by more than one person. In the broad phase, 300 users each labeled five pages chosen randomly from the corpus, producing 15,644 labels.

Procedure

First the Mechanical Turk interface presented to participants redirected them to a tutorial on the labeling interface. The instructions directed users to apply semantic labels to the five most *important* and the five most *interesting* elements on the page. Participants were also instructed to avoid labeling many elements of the same type, to encourage diversity in the data set.

Given our focus on structural semantics, workers were told to choose labels that described the element’s *role* in the information architecture of the the page rather than its *content*. For instance, a picture of a silverware set on a shopping page should be labeled *PRODUCT_IMAGE* instead of *SILVERWARE*. Workers were also instructed to chose the most specific applicable label, eschewing generalities such as *TEXT*. To proceed to the labeling task, users were shown a few basic examples of appropriate labels, and required to correctly apply one label to a sample element.

The labeling interface presents workers with a screenshot of a Web page (Figure 2). When a participant hovers the mouse over part of the page, the corresponding element in the page’s visual segmentation is highlighted. Clicking on an element allows the user to enter a text label for it, which can be edited later by clicking on the element again. When typing a label, users are prompted with a drop-down list of auto-completed suggestions—sourced from a small pilot labeling study—which they may use or ignore. Workers apply at least ten elements to each page before moving on to the next; after five pages have been labeled, the interface provides an identifier to the worker to verify the task’s completion.

Results

Participants produced 21,995 labels across 16,753 distinct elements in 1490 Web pages. There were 2657 distinct labels in total, 716 of which occurred more than once, and 629 of which were applied by more than one user. Each participant used 23.6 distinct labels on average (min = 3, max = 76, $\sigma = 9.7$). Excluding labels from the autocomplete list, participants generated an average of nine original label names (min = 0, max = 60, $\sigma = 10$).

In addition to general characteristics of the resulting dataset, the following sections provide two statistical analyses for better understanding the labels that participants produced. First,

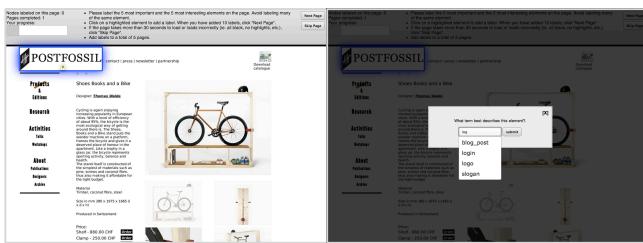


Figure 2. The interface used in the label collection study. Page elements are highlighted in blue upon mouseover (left). After clicking on the highlighted element, users enter semantic labels into a textbox (right).

we examined label *co-occurrence*, to determine which labels different workers commonly assign to the same page elements. Second, we examined the *spatial distribution* of labels to determine where certain kinds of page elements commonly appear on a page.

Characteristics of Dataset

The collected labels cover a wide range of concepts, with tags as general as IMAGE and as specific as COPYRIGHT. Workers tagged some elements common to most Web pages, such as NAVIGATION, and others that are highly domain specific, such as PRODUCT_IMAGE. The ten most common labels were NAVIGATION_ELEMENT, NAVIGATION_BAR, LOGO, SEARCH, SOCIAL_MEDIA, ADVERTISEMENT, ARTICLE_TITLE, MAIN_CONTENT, BLOG_POST, and AND CONTACT_LINK, with frequencies ranging from 1772 to 436. The mean label frequency was 8.3 (min = 1, max = 1772, $\sigma = 65.8$).

Figure 3 shows the labels' relative frequencies in a tag cloud. Labels which have direct analogues to any one of the 106 tags in HTML 5 are highlighted in red. The 17 HTML tags to which these labels correspond include <A>, <ADDRESS>, <ARTICLE>, <BLOCKQUOTE>, <BODY>, <CAPTION>, <FIGCAPTION>, <FOOTER>, <FORM>, <H1-H6>, <HEADER>, <HGROUP>, , <INPUT>, <NAV>, <TIME>, and <VIDEO>. At a high level, the relatively small overlap between our crowdsourced labels and the set of available HTML tags illustrates the difficulties of developing a semantic ontology that is sufficiently expressive and complete.

Label Co-occurrence

Since information architecture is far from an exact science, not all people will assign the same semantic label to a given page element. In addition, some workers may use different descriptors to label the same concept.

To more thoroughly understand how labels relate to one another, we created a co-occurrence matrix for the 85 most-frequent labels, each of which was used twenty or more times. We form an 85×85 symmetric matrix, where the value at



Figure 3. A tag cloud of the 110 most common semantic labels, sized to show relative frequency. The tags highlighted in red have direct analogues in HTML 5.

(i, j) is the number of times that tag i and tag j were used to label the same page element, normalized by the total number of uses of i and j . Then, the matrix is reordered using Anti-Robinson seriation to form clusters of co-occurring labels along the diagonal [3].

Figure 4 shows the resulting matrix, with portions of the diagonal magnified to show co-occurring labels. The cell opacities represent the degree of co-occurrence between the corresponding labels: darker cells indicate more co-occurrences while lighter cells indicate fewer. A number of clusters with labels like RATING and REVIEW (panel E) simply point out elements that are closely related. Some show workers using different words to describe the same concept, like COMPANY_LOGO and LOGO (panel A). Other groupings reflect a lack of a clear consensus on the role of elements such as FEATURED_ITEM and PRODUCT_IMAGE (panel I). Labels like SITE_TITLE and HEADER (panel C) describe the same general structure with varying levels of specificity.

Overall the distinct clusters illustrate where users agreed upon and were consistent with their semantic vocabulary. The heavy concentration of high-opacity cells along the diagonal indicates strong clusters of co-occurrence.

Spatial Distributions

Another useful way to gain insight about the labels participants produced is to examine the spatial distributions of their corresponding page elements. For a given label, we identify the set of page elements to which the label was assigned, and obtain the bounding rectangle for each one from the page's DOM tree. We rescale these rectangles to the range $[0, 1] \times [0, 1]$ to make the coordinates comparable between pages, and rasterize them into a floating-point accumulation buffer. Normalizing the resultant image so that its pixel values sum to one approximates the two-dimensional spatial probability distribution of the tag. The value of any given point in the image is the probability of the label appearing in that position on a page.

Figure 5 shows spatial distributions for 28 popular labels. While some distributions are useful but unsurprising (HEADER tags appear almost universally at the top of pages), others give more insight into the structure of Web pages. Note, for instance the strong concentration of LOGIN and SEARCH elements in the upper right corner of pages, the bimodal distribution of ADVERTISEMENT elements between sidebar and header, and the high frequency of EXTERNAL_LINKS along and increasing toward the middle of the right sidebar. Taken together, the strong spatial correlations that many of the collected tags exhibit provide a visual justification for learning classifiers for structural semantics.

LEARNING STRUCTURAL SEMANTIC CLASSIFIERS

To evaluate the feasibility of learning structural semantics from data, we trained binary SVM classifiers for the study's 40 most frequent labels. To determine the prediction accuracy of the classifiers, we ran a hold-out test on labeled pages. Finally, we used the learned classifiers to identify and rank semantic elements in a large dataset of pages.

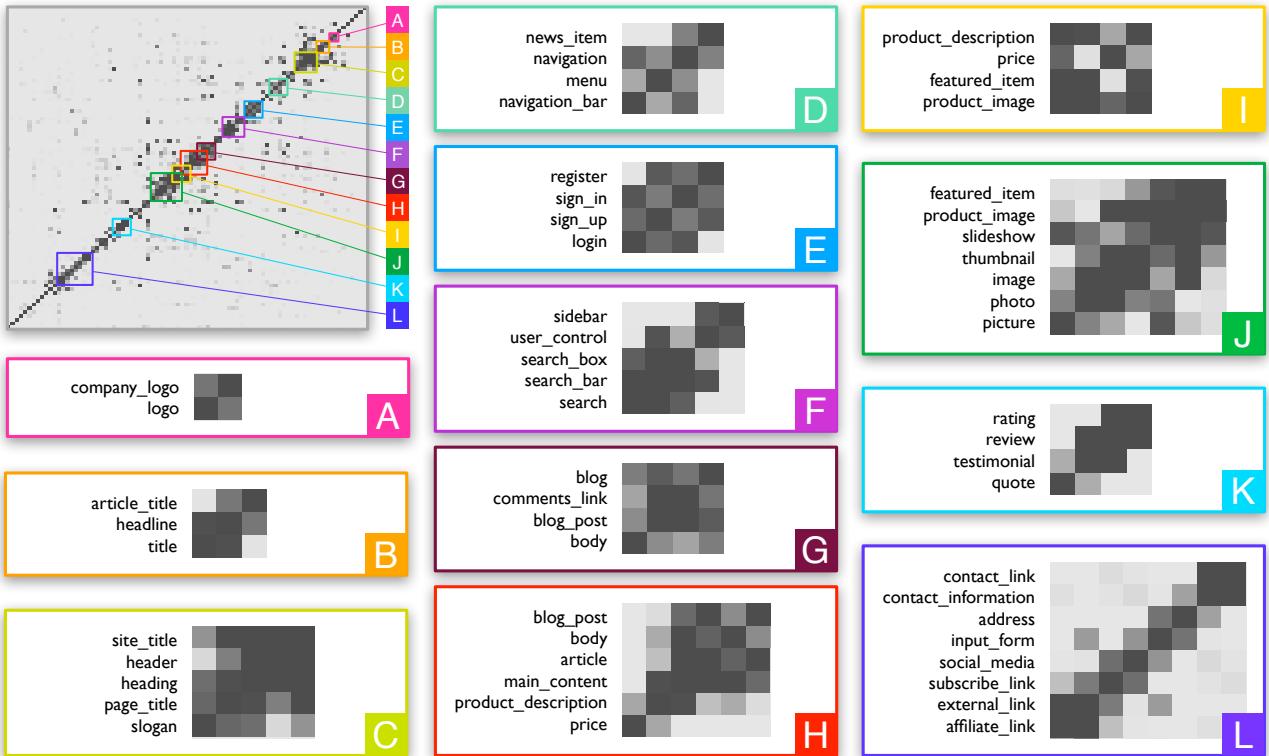


Figure 4. The label co-occurrence matrix, seriated via ARSA [3]. Overlapping sections of the matrix are highlighted and magnified to show labels that frequently occur together.

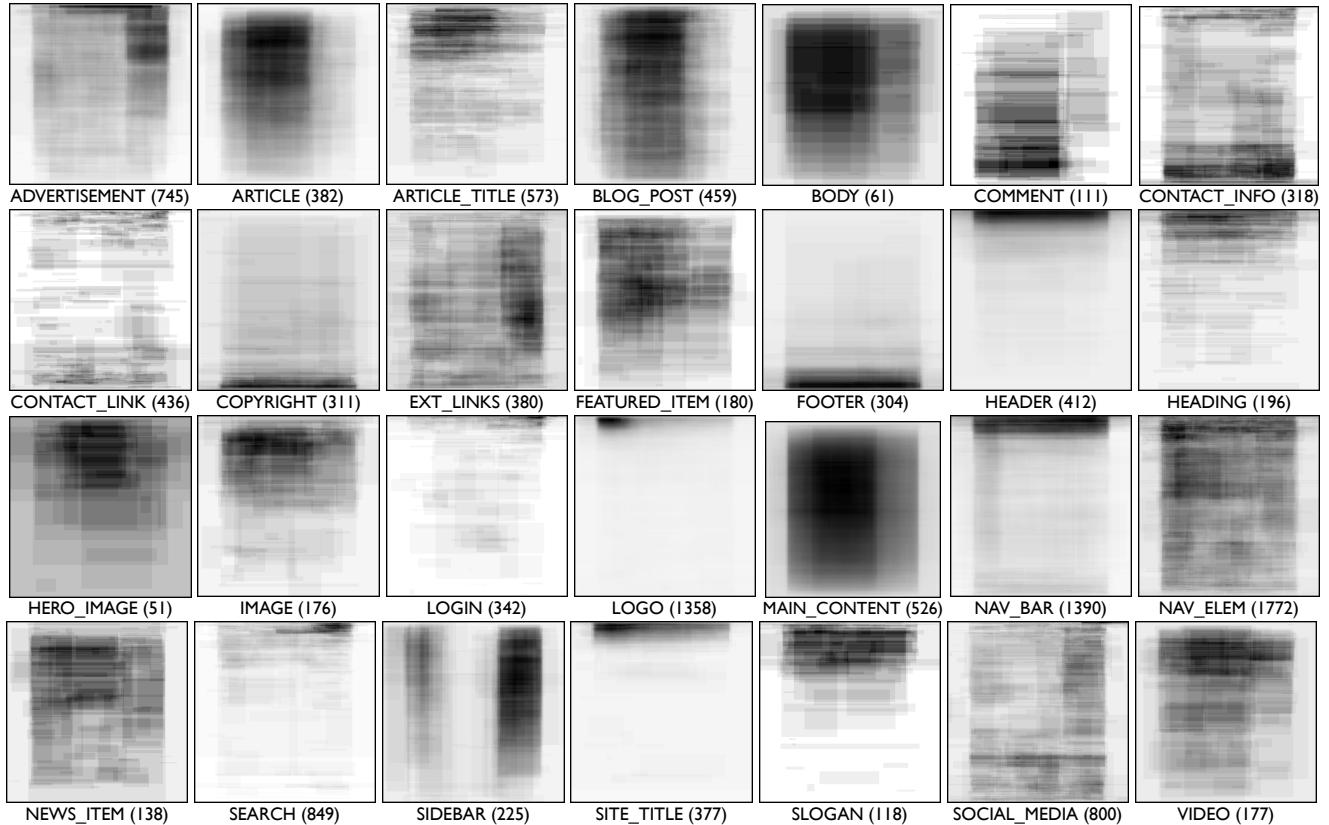


Figure 5. Spatial probability distributions for 28 labels, along with the number of elements used to construct each distribution. Many elements exhibit strong spatial correlations.

Training

For each distinct label, we constructed a *training* set and a *test* set of page elements. The training set consisted of 80% of the page elements to which the label had been applied (the positive examples), and twice that number of randomly selected page elements to which other labels were applied (the negative elements). The test set consisted of the remaining 20% of positively labeled page elements, and twice that number again of randomly selected negative elements.

To drive the learning, each page element was associated with a 1,679-dimensional feature vector provided by the Webzeitgeist repository. These features were drawn from three categories: render-time HTML and CSS properties computed by the DOM ($N = 691$), GIST descriptors computed on elements' rendered images (four scales and five orientations per scale on a 4×4 grid; $N = 960$) [15], and simple structural and computer vision properties provided by Webzeitgeist ($N = 28$).

We trained three regularized support vector classification SVMs for each label: one with DOM features, one with GIST features, and a third using all the features together. We used LIBSVM to perform the training [5], with radial basis kernels and $\gamma = \frac{1}{1679}$. Once a classifier is trained, it can be applied to a page element in under $1\mu s$.

Prediction Accuracy Results

The prediction training and test accuracies for each classifier and data model are shown in the inset table, where the first column represents the number of positive examples in the training set for the corresponding label. Test accuracies ranged from 54.9% for COMMENT to 94.7% for ENTIRE_PAGE. This variation can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, some elements are structurally more consistent and/or prominent than others, for example FOOTER elements generally occupy a significant space at the bottom of a page, while DATE can be a variable-width text node that occurs anywhere on the page. While elements such as LOGO are clearly defined, others such as FEATURED_ITEM may exhibit more variation in the types of elements they refer to. Number of examples and structural dependencies may also affect prediction accuracy.

The average test accuracy for the DOM, GIST, and ALL models were 74.6%, 71.7%, and 76.6% respectively. The combined model equaled or outperformed the DOM- and GIST-alone models for all but seven of the forty labels; examining the training accuracy for those nine shows that this discrepancy is mostly attributable to overfitting. While these results are far from perfect, all of the classifiers do better than random, and most substantially so.

Identifying Structural Elements

To show the learned classifiers in action, we applied twelve of them across a database of 500k page elements spanning 3000 pages. We proceeded to rank the results in order of decreasing probabilities, which were obtained via the method described in [22]. A few representative results for each classifier are shown in Figure 6; page elements that appeared to be misclassified are marked with a red border.

Label	#	DOM		GIST		ALL	
		Train	Test	Train	Test	Train	Test
ENTIRE_PAGE	74	91.9	94.7	86.9	75.4	94.6	94.7
SEARCH	551	88.7	88.2	82.8	84.5	91.8	91.5
FOOTER	186	83.0	78.0	74.6	75.9	90.0	89.4
IMAGE	169	84.0	81.0	79.7	79.4	86.4	88.9
SIDEBAR	133	86.0	84.8	82.7	84.8	86.7	87.9
COPYRIGHT	206	86.1	82.1	75.7	76.3	88.4	87.8
NAVIGATION_BAR	901	80.7	83.4	74.6	72.7	86.5	87.4
LOGO	770	80.7	84.0	77.9	77.6	87.0	87.3
ARTICLE_TITLE	373	84.2	82.8	80.3	82.4	86.7	87.1
MAIN_CONTENT	350	82.8	82.8	78.9	80.1	83.0	83.1
PRODUCT_IMAGE	65	79.5	79.2	77.4	75.0	85.1	81.3
THUMBNAIL	83	84.7	76.2	79.5	73.0	86.7	81.0
HEADING	134	79.4	87.3	74.9	67.6	77.9	80.4
ARTICLE	237	75.2	72.9	81.4	79.7	85.9	80.2
LOGIN	222	80.8	73.9	77.8	74.5	84.5	78.8
ADVERTISEMENT	487	79.2	76.2	75.2	72.4	85.6	77.9
NAV_ELEMENT	1138	75.9	75.4	72.6	73.5	78.6	77.8
VIDEO	107	74.8	71.6	81.9	72.8	81.9	77.8
BLOG_POST	259	75.5	72.3	73.6	73.8	81.9	77.4
HEADER	265	78.5	77.3	69.2	67.2	80.8	77.3
CONTACT_LINK	278	76.7	75.2	74.8	71.0	80.7	76.2
SOCIAL_MEDIA	514	75.0	72.7	76.5	70.1	82.2	75.0
SITE_TITLE	272	75.9	74.0	76.1	70.6	81.3	75.0
DATE	91	79.1	69.6	78.0	73.9	79.5	73.9
IMAGE_GALLERY	94	76.6	76.8	75.2	71.0	82.3	73.9
RECOMM_LINKS	137	69.8	66.7	68.9	66.7	76.4	73.5
CONTACT_INFO	183	77.2	67.4	69.9	68.1	79.6	73.2
LANG_SELECT	70	77.1	68.6	75.2	70.6	83.3	72.5
PROD_DESC	232	77.2	71.8	74.7	68.4	77.0	72.4
SLOGAN	79	69.6	63.3	70.5	70.0	76.4	70.0
AUTHOR	94	72.7	62.3	67.4	68.1	70.6	69.6
SUBSCRIBE_LINK	158	68.1	67.5	69.6	67.5	71.3	68.4
FEATURED_ITEM	107	71.3	71.6	73.5	58.0	76.9	66.7
COMMENTS_LINK	93	80.6	71.0	67.7	66.7	70.3	66.7
AFFILIATE_LINK	78	66.7	66.7	66.7	66.7	66.7	66.7
EXTERNAL_LINKS	270	67.2	66.2	68.9	66.2	73.8	66.2
SIGN_UP	134	74.9	65.7	69.2	66.7	73.9	65.7
NEWS_ITEM	121	68.9	65.6	71.1	64.4	72.2	65.6
DOWNLOAD_LINK	77	73.6	63.2	66.7	66.7	74.5	64.9
COMMENT	70	77.6	76.5	75.7	56.9	78.6	54.9

These examples offer some insight into the performance of the classifiers. Most of the highly-ranked elements are classified correctly, despite their diverse contexts and compositions. Given that these classifiers are trained only on visual and structural data, their expressive power provides support for the notion that structural semantics can be learned without requiring more complex content-based semantics (see, for instance, SLOGAN). Many of the errant classifications are subtle, and might plausibly confuse a human worker: see for instance ARTICLE_TITLE, which classifies several titles that are not, strictly speaking, associated with articles; and NAVIGATION_BAR, which identifies page elements filled with links directing users to *other* sites.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

This paper introduced a technique for adding post-hoc structural semantics to the Web, demonstrating that a relatively simple machine learning technique can identify semantic elements in pages when trained on a corpus of human annotations. There remain, however, several avenues for future work.

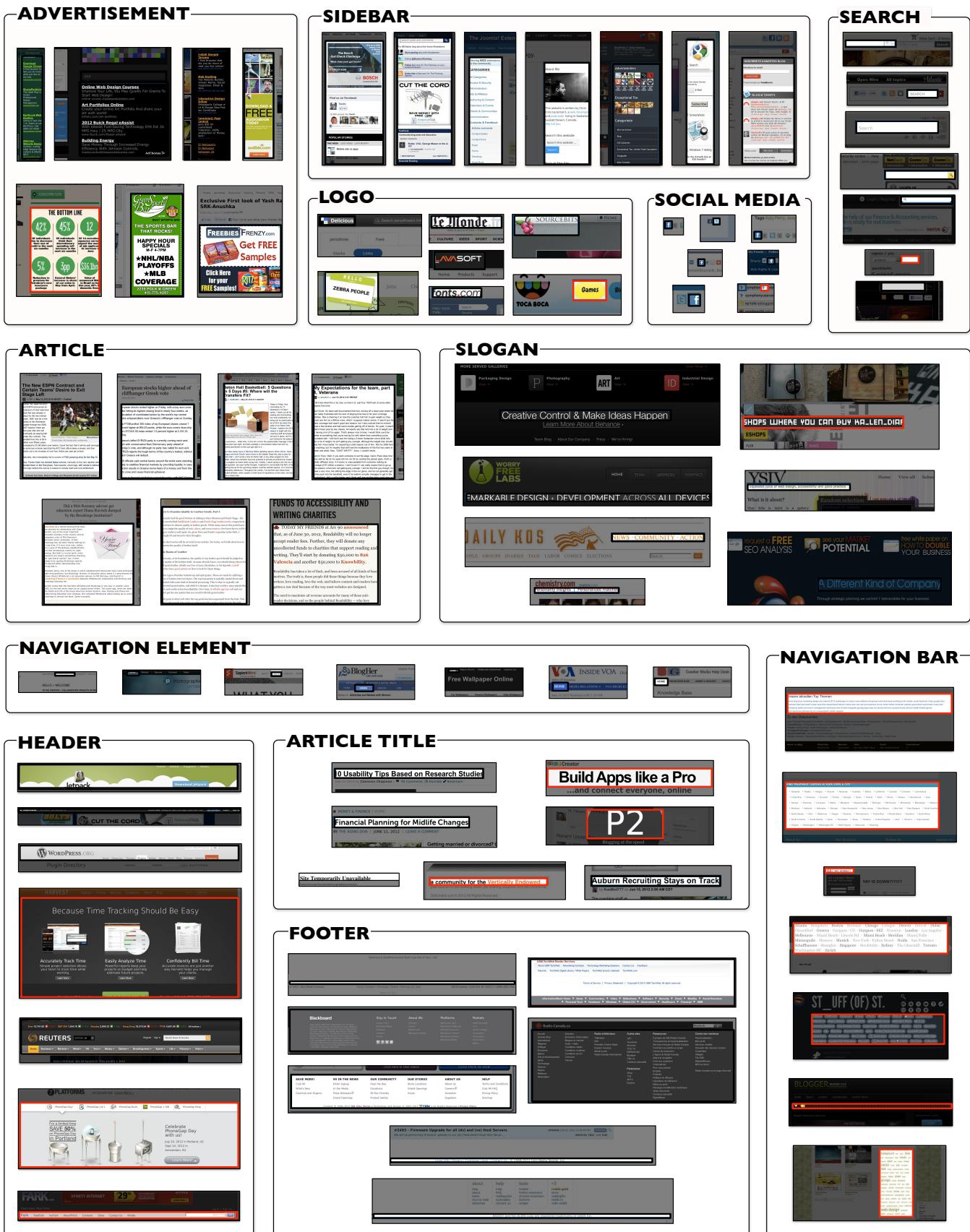


Figure 6. The seven highest-ranked results in our database of 500k pages for each of twelve classifiers learned by our method. Page elements were ranked by probability estimate, and a maximum of one node per page is displayed. Elements which were classified incorrectly are highlighted in red.

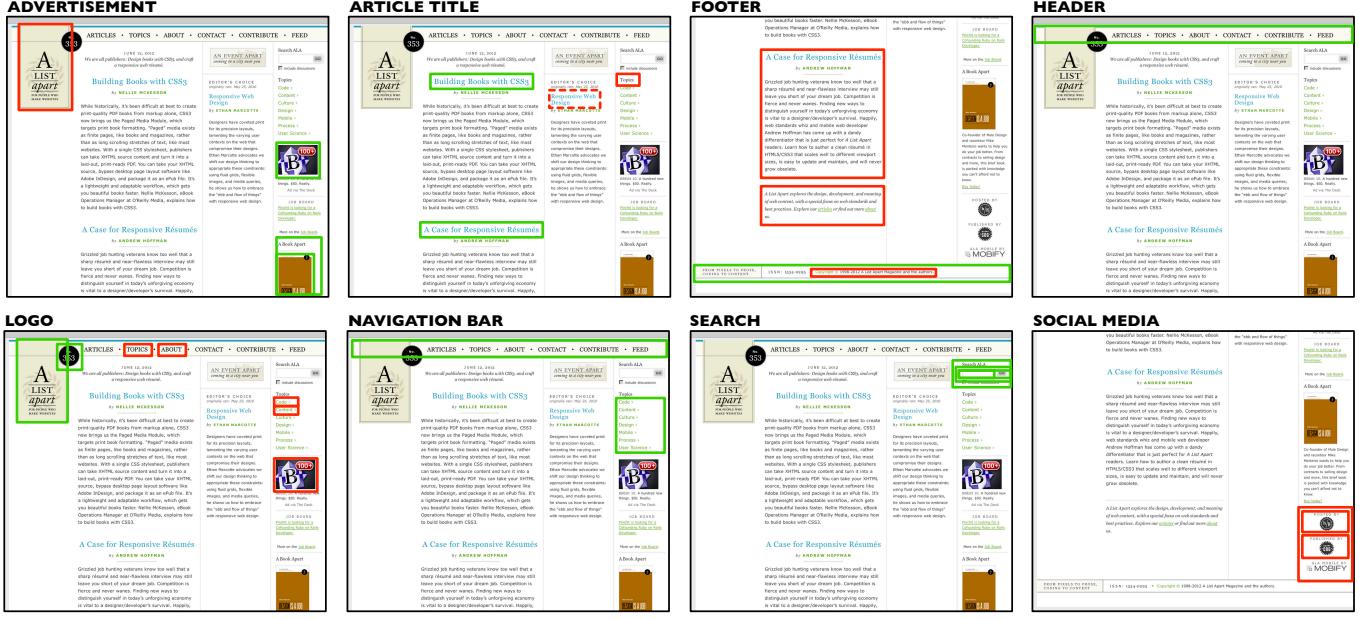


Figure 7. Eight learned classifiers used to identify structural semantic elements on a page with 67 DOM elements. Correct classifications are shown in green, false positives in solid red, and false negatives in dashed red.

First, it is important to note that our classifiers cannot realistically be used to enable one-click annotation of pages in their current form. Pages in our training set averaged 1380 DOM nodes per page; with this many elements, even a 99.9% per-classifier accuracy rate from a classifiers trained on a perfectly labeled set of nodes would yield several misclassified nodes on every page. These results would be acceptable for some real-world applications that can tolerate false positives, such as Web search; however the success rate might be inadequate for those requiring near-perfect accuracy (Figure 7).

Several possibilities for improving the learning come to mind. Using our classifiers to bootstrap an online learning process is one obvious approach, likely to significantly reduce overfitting and greatly simplify the acquisition of additional training data. Adding more sophisticated structural and computer vision features is another: estimates of foreground area, for instance, might prove useful in recognizing logos, while structural features like “number of links to external domains” could improve the classification of navigation bars.

Another promising approach is to turn to machine learning methods that make better use of page structure. Currently, the classification algorithm assumes that labels are independent between elements, a faulty assumption because the presence of certain labels provides useful clues for others. Structured SVMs could be used to predict labels to the entire page as a whole [20]. Deep learning techniques, like those based on recursive neural networks—might allow the development of a more structurally-sensitive feature space. These methods would enable easier classification of elements whose semantic function is highly dependent on its relation to other elements in the page hierarchy [18].

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