Bayesian Persuasion in Sequential Decision-Making

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Abstract

We study a dynamic model of Bayesian persuasion in sequential decision-making settings. An informed principal observes an external parameter of the world and advises an uninformed agent about actions to take over time. The agent takes actions in each time step based on the current state, the principal's advice/signal, and beliefs about the external parameter. The action of the agent updates the state according to a stochastic process. The model arises naturally in many applications, e.g., an app (the principal) can advice the user (the agent) on possible choices between actions based on additional real-time information the app has. We study the problem of designing a signaling strategy from the principal's point of view. We show that the principal has an optimal strategy against a myopic agent, who only optimizes their rewards locally, and the optimal strategy can be computed in polynomial time. In contrast, it is NP-hard to approximate an optimal policy against a far-sighted agent. Further, if the principal has the power to threaten the agent by not providing future signals, then we can efficiently compute a threat-based strategy. This strategy guarantees the principal's payoff as if playing against an agent who is far-sighted but myopic to future signals.

1 Introduction

Uncertainty is prevalent in models of sequential decision making. Usually, an agent relies on prior knowledge and Bayesian updates as a basic approach to dealing with uncertainties. In many scenarios, a knowledgeable *principal* has direct access to external information and can reveal it to influence the agent's behavior. For example, a navigation app (the principal) normally knows about the global traffic conditions and can inform a user (the agent) who decides to pick a particular route based on the app's advice. The additional information can be beneficial in improving the quality of the agent's decision making. Moreover, by strategically revealing the external information, the principal can also persuade the agent to act in a way beneficial to the principal.

We study the related persuasion problem in a dynamic environment. In a static setting, the interaction between the principal and the agent is modeled by *Bayesian persuasion* (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011), where the principal uses their information advantage to influence the agent's strategy in a one-shot game, by way of signaling. In this paper,

we extend this setting to include interaction in an infinite-horizon Markov decision process (MDP), where rewards incurred depend on the state of the environment, the action performed, as well as an external parameter sampled from a known prior distribution at each step. The principal, who cannot directly influence the state, observes the realization of this external parameter and signals the agent about their observation. The agent chooses to perform an action based on the state and the signal, and the action updates the state according to a stochastic transition function. Both the principal and the agent aim to optimize their own rewards received in the course of the play.

If the objectives of the principal and the agent are completely aligned, the principal should reveal true information about the external parameter, so the more interesting case is when they are misaligned. For example, a user of an navigation app only wants to optimize their commute times but the app may want to incentivize the user to upgrade to a better service, or to increase traffic throughput when the app is provided by a social planner. We consider two major types of agents—a *myopic* type and a *far-sighted* type—and investigate the problem of optimal signaling strategy design against these agent types. A myopic agent optimizes their payoff locally: in each step, they take an action that will give them the highest immediate reward. Myopic agents can model a large number of "short-lived" agents each appearing instantly in a system (e.g., users of a ride-sharing app or an E-commerce website). A far-sighted agent, on the other hand, optimizes their long-run cumulative reward and accounts for the signals in future steps. This makes signaling strategy design more complicated as the agent's optimal behavior can depend on future information disclosure.

We show that, in the myopic setting, an optimal signaling strategy for the principal can be computed in polynomial time through a reduction to linear programming. On the other hand, for far-sighted agents, we show that optimal signaling strategy design is computationally intractable: if P≠NP, there exists no polynomial time approximation scheme. Our proof of computational intractability is quite general, and extends to showing hardness of several related problems in the principal-agent setting.

To work around the computational barrier, we focus on a special type of far-sighted agents who are *advice-myopic*. An advice-myopic agent optimizes their cumulative reward
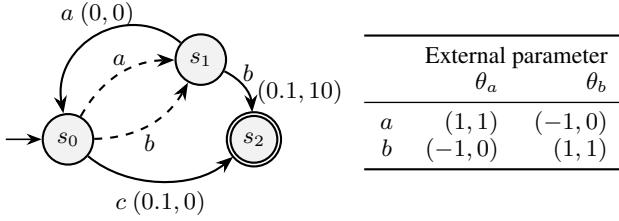
Figure 1: A simple example: a principal wishes to reach s_2 while maximizing rewards. All transitions are deterministic, and every edge is labeled with the corresponding action and, in the brackets, rewards for the agent and the principal, respectively. Only the rewards for state-action pairs (s_0, a) and (s_0, b) (dashed edges) depend on the 2-valued external parameter, which are specified in the table on the right; the value is sampled uniformly at random at each step. Assume uniform discounting with discount $\frac{1}{2}$. Without signaling, the agent will always take action c in s_0, whereby the principal obtains payoff 0. The principal can reveal information about the external parameter to attract the agent to move to s_1. If the agent is myopic, the principal can reveal full information, which leads to the agent moving to s_1, taking action b, and ending in s_2; the principal obtains payoff 6 as a result. However, if the agent is far-sighted, this will not work: the agent will end up in a loop in s_0 and s_1, resulting in overall payoff $4/3$ for the principal. To improve, the principal can choose to send less informative signals in s_0: e.g., advising the agent to take the more profitable action 10% of the time and a uniformly sampled action in $\{a, b\}$ the remaining 90% of the time. The agent will be incentivized to move to s_1 then. Alternatively, the principal can also use a threat-based strategy, which yields an even higher payoff in this instance: always reveal the true information in s_0, advise the agent to take b in s_1, and stop providing any information if the agent does not follow the advice. This threat strategy also coincides with how an advice myopic agent would behave: such an agent will choose b at s_1 since future disclosures are not considered.

over time based on the history of information disclosures, but does not assume that the principal will continue to provide information in the future. We expect such behavior to be a natural heuristic in the real world when agents resort to prior knowledge, but not future information disclosure, to estimate future rewards. We show optimal signaling strategies can again be computed in polynomial-time. More interestingly, the solution can be used to design a threat-based signaling strategy against a far-sighted agent. We show that this threat-based strategy induces the same reaction from a far-sighted agent as from an advice-myopic agent. Hence, it guarantees the principal the payoff obtained against an advice myopic agent, even when the actual agent is far-sighted.

Figure 1 shows the subtleties of optimal signaling strategies in the dynamic setting.

Related Work   Our starting point is the work on Bayesian persuasion (Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011), which looks at optimal signaling under incomplete information in the *static* case. Many variants of this model has been proposed and studied ever since, with applications in security, voting, advertising, finance, etc. (e.g., Rabinovich et al. 2015; Xu et al. 2015; Goldstein and Leitner 2018; Badanidiyuru, Bhawalkar, and Xu 2018; Castiglioni, Celli, and

Gatti 2020); also see the comprehensive surveys (Kamenica 2019; Dughmi 2017). Dynamic models of Bayesian persuasion were studied recently (Ely 2017; Renault, Solan, and Vieille 2017), and some more recent works focused on algorithmic problems from several dynamic models, such as a model built on extensive-form games (EFGs) (Celli, Coniglio, and Gatti 2020) and an online persuasion model (Castiglioni et al. 2020, 2021). These models are sufficiently different from ours. In the EFG model, in particular, an EFG parameterized by the state of nature (akin to our external parameter) is instantiated before the play, and a group of receivers then engage in the EFG and they infer the EFG being played according to signals from a sender. Hence, information exchange happens only once in this model, whereas it happens in every step in ours. Such one-off persuasions also appeared in several other works on Bayesian persuasion and, more broadly, on non-cooperative IRL (inverse reinforcement learning) and incentive exploration (Zhang et al. 2019; Mansour et al. 2021; Simchowitz and Slivkins 2021).

Reversing the roles of the players in terms of who has the power to commit leads to a dual problem of Bayesian persuasion, which is often known as automated mechanism design (Conitzer and Sandholm 2002, 2004). In such problems, the signal receiver commits to a mechanism that specifies the action they will take upon receiving each signal, and the signal sender sends signals optimally in response. A very recent work by Zhang and Conitzer (2021) considered automated mechanism design in a dynamic setting similar to ours, and offered a complementary view to our work. In their work, the primary consideration is a finite-horizon setting and history-based strategies. In contrast, we focus primarily on unbounded horizons and memory-less strategies.

The interaction between the principal and the agent can be viewed as a stochastic game (Shapley 1953) where one player (i.e., the principal) has the power to make a strategy commitment (Letchford and Conitzer 2010; Letchford et al. 2012). Games where multiple agents jointly take actions in a dynamic environment have been widely studied in the literature on multi-agent reinforcement learning, but usually in settings without strategy commitment (Littman 1994; Buşoniu, Babuška, and De Schutter 2010).

More broadly, our work also relates to the advice-based interaction framework (e.g., Torrey and Taylor 2013; Amir et al. 2016), where the principal's goal is to communicate advice to an agent on how to act in the world. This advice-based framework is also in close relationship to the machine teaching literature (Goldman and Kearns 1995; Singla et al. 2014; Doliwa et al. 2014; Zhu et al. 2018; Ng and Russell 2000; Hadfield-Menell et al. 2016) where the principal (i.e., the teacher) seeks to find an optimal training sequence to steer the agent (i.e., the learner) towards the desired goal. Similarly, in environment design, the principal modifies the rewards or transitions to steer the behavior of the agent. The objective of the principal might be speeding up the agent's convergence (Ng, Harada, and Russell 1999; Mataric 1994), or inducing the agent to follow a target policy beneficial for the principal (Zhang and Parkes 2008; Zhang, Parkes, and Chen 2009; Ma et al. 2019; Rakhsha et al. 2020b; Huang and Zhu 2019; Rakhsha et al. 2020a). These problem set-

tings are similar to ours in that the principal cannot directly act in the environment but can influence the agent's actions via learning signals. We see our setting and techniques as complementary to these studies; in particular, our hardness results can be extended there as well.

2 The Model

Our formal model is an MDP with reward uncertainties, given by a tuple $\mathcal{M} = \left\langle S, A, P, \Theta, (\mu_s)_{s \in S}, R, \widetilde{R} \right\rangle$ and involves two players: a *principal* and an *agent*. Similar to a standard MDP, S is a finite state space of the environment; A is a finite action space *for the agent*; $P : S \times A \times S \to [0, 1]$ is the transition dynamics of the state. When the environment is in state s and the agent takes action a, the state transitions to s' with probability $P(s, a, s')$; both the principal and the agent are aware of the state throughout. Meanwhile, rewards are generated for the principal and the agent, which are specified by the reward functions $R : S \times \Theta \times A \to \mathbb{R}$ and $\widetilde{R} : S \times \Theta \times A \to \mathbb{R}$, respectively. Hence, unlike in a standard MDP, the rewards depend not only on the current state and action taken, but also an external parameter $\theta \in \Theta$. This parameter captures uncertainties of the environment; it follows a distribution $\mu_s \in \Delta(\Theta)$ and is drawn anew every time the state changes. For all $s \in S$, μ_s is common prior knowledge shared between the principal and the agent; however, only the principal has access to the realization of θ.

Crucially, since the actions are taken only by the agent, the principal cannot directly influence the state. Instead, the principal can use their information advantage about the external parameter to persuade the agent to take certain actions, by way of signaling.

Signaling and Belief Update   Let G be a space of *signals*. A signaling strategy of the principal generates a distribution over signals. Our primary consideration in this paper is Markovian signaling strategies, in which the signal depends only on the current step and maps the external parameter to a signal distribution. Formally, a signaling strategy $\pi = (\pi_s)_{s \in S}$ of the principal consists of a function $\pi_s : \Theta \to \Delta(G)$ for each state $s \in S$. Hence, upon observing an external parameter θ, the principal will send a signal sampled from $\pi_s(\theta)$ when the current state is s; we denote by $\pi_s(\theta, g)$ the probability of $g \in G$ in this distribution.

The signal space is broadly construed. For example, one simple signaling strategy is to always reveal the true information, which sends a signal g_θ associated with $\theta \in \Theta$ deterministically (e.g., g_θ is a message saying "The current external state is θ") whenever the private state is θ, i.e., $\pi_s(\theta) = \hat{\mathbf{e}}_{g_\theta}$.[1] On the contrary, if the signals sent are always the same, i.e., $\pi_s(\theta) = \pi_s(\theta')$ for all $\theta, \theta' \in \Theta$, then the signaling strategy is completely uninformative.

Upon receiving a signal g, the agent updates their belief about the (distribution of) the external parameter accordingly: the conditional probability of the external parameter being θ is

$$\Pr(\theta | g, \pi_s) = \frac{\mu_s(\theta) \cdot \pi_s(\theta, g)}{\sum_{\theta' \in \Theta} \mu_s(\theta') \cdot \pi_s(\theta', g)}, \tag{1}$$

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[1]We let $\hat{\mathbf{e}}_i$ denote a unit vector, of which the i-th element is 1.

which also relies on knowledge about the principal's signaling strategy π. Indeed, we follow the Bayesian persuasion framework, whereby the principal has the power to commit to a signaling strategy π at the beginning of the game and announces it to the agent.

Signaling Strategy Optimization   We study the game from the perspective of the principal and investigate the problem of optimal signaling strategy design. The *optimal signaling strategy design* problem asks, given $\mathcal{M}$, to find a signaling strategy π that maximizes the principal's discounted cumulative reward $\mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t R(s_t, \theta_t, a_t) | \mathbf{z}, \pi\right]$, where $\mathbf{z} = (z_s)_{s \in S}$ is the distribution of the starting state, and the expectation is over the trajectory $(s_t, \theta_t, a_t)_{t=0}^{\infty}$ induced by the signaling strategy π and any strategy of the agent. To completely specify this task requires a behavioral model for the agent. We will consider two major types of behavioral models — a *myopic* agent and a *far-sighted* agent — and will define them separately in the next two sections; a myopic agent only cares about their instant reward in each step, whereas a far-sighted agent considers the cumulative reward with a discount factor $\tilde{\gamma}$. (We do not consider myopic principals: that problem reduces to an MDP for the agent.)

In summary, the game proceeds as follows. At the beginning, the principal commits to a signaling strategy π and announces it to the agent. Then in each step, if the environment is in state s, an external parameter $\theta \sim \mu_s$ is drawn; the principal observes θ, samples a signal $g \sim \pi_s(\theta)$, and sends g to the agent. The agent receives g, updates their belief about θ (according to (1)), and decides an action $a \in A$ to take accordingly. The state then transitions to $s' \sim P(s, a, \cdot)$.

3 When Agent is Myopic

A *myopic* agent aims to maximize their reward in each individual step. Hence, upon receiving a signal g in state s, the agent will take a best action $a \in A$, which maximizes $\mathbb{E}_{\theta' \sim \Pr(\cdot | g, \pi_s)} \widetilde{R}(s, \theta', a)$. The principal receives an instant reward $R(s, \theta, a)$, where θ is the realized external parameter. In this section, we study the problem of computing an optimal signaling strategy against a myopic agent, which we term OPTSIG-MYOP.

Action Advice   According to a standard argument via the revelation principle, it is often without loss of generality to consider signaling strategies in the form of action advice. This is also the case in our model. Specifically, for any signaling strategy, there exists an equivalent strategy π which uses only a finite set $G_A := \{g_a : a \in A\}$ of signals, where each signal g_a corresponds to an action $a \in A$; moreover, π is *incentive compatible* (IC), which means that the agent is also incentivized to take the corresponding action a upon receiving g_a, i.e., $\mathbb{E}_{\theta' \sim \Pr(\cdot | g, \pi_s)} \widetilde{R}(s, \theta', a) \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta' \sim \Pr(\cdot | g, \pi_s)} \widetilde{R}(s, \theta', a')$ for all $a' \in A$,[2] or equivalently:

$$\sum_{\theta \in \Theta} \Pr(\theta | g_a, \pi_s) \cdot \left(\widetilde{R}(s, \theta, a) - \widetilde{R}(s, \theta, a') \right) \geq 0 \ \forall a'. \tag{2}$$

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[2]By convention, we assume that the agent breaks ties following the advised action when there are multiple optimal actions.

We refer the reader to the full version of this paper for more details about the generality of this special type of signaling strategies. In other words, π signals which action the agent should take and it ensures that the agent would not be better off deviating from this advised action, with respect to the posterior belief. A signaling strategy that only uses signals in G_A is called an *action advice*; it is an *IC* action advice if it also satisfies (2).

Hence, when an IC action advice π is used, the agent takes action a whenever receiving signal g_a. This allows us to easily characterize the outcome of π: in each state s, with probability $\phi_s^\pi(\theta, a) := \mu_s(\theta) \cdot \pi_s(\theta, g_a)$ the agent will take action a while the realized external parameter is θ. We can then define the following set $\mathcal{A}_s \subseteq \Delta(\Theta \times A)$, which contains all inducible distributions of (θ, a):

$$\mathcal{A}_s = \{\phi_s^\pi : \pi \text{ is an IC action advice}\}.$$

It would now be convenient to view the problem facing the principal as an (single-agent) MDP $\mathcal{M}^* = \langle S, (\mathcal{A}_s)_{s \in S}, P^*, R^* \rangle$, where S is the same state space in $\mathcal{M}$; $\mathcal{A}_s$ defines an (possibly infinite) action space for each s; the transition dynamics $P^* : S \times \Delta(\Theta \times A) \times S \to [0, 1]$ and reward function $R^* : S \times \Delta(\Theta \times A) \to \mathbb{R}$ are such that

$$P^*(s, \mathbf{x}, s') = \mathbb{E}_{(\theta, a) \sim \mathbf{x}} P(s, a, s'),$$
$$\text{and} \quad R^*(s, \mathbf{x}) = \mathbb{E}_{(\theta, a) \sim \mathbf{x}} R(s, \theta, a).$$

Thus, $\mathcal{M}^*$ is defined as if the principal can choose actions (which are (θ, a) pairs) freely from $\mathcal{A}_s$, whereas the choice is actually realized through action advising. A policy σ for $\mathcal{M}^*$ maps each state s to an action $\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s$, and it corresponds to IC action advices π with $\phi_s^\pi = \sigma(s)$ for all s. The problem of designing an optimal action advice then translates to computing an optimal policy for $\mathcal{M}^*$. We show next that we can exploit a standard approach to compute an optimal policy but we need to address a key challenge as the action space of $\mathcal{M}^*$ may contain infinitely many actions.

LP Formulation The standard approach to computing an optimal policy for an MDP is to compute a value function $V : S \to \mathbb{R}$ that satisfies the Bellman equation:

$$V(s) = \max_{\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s} \left[R^*(s, \mathbf{x}) + \gamma \cdot \sum_{s' \in S} P^*(s, \mathbf{x}, s') \cdot V(s') \right] \forall s. \tag{3}$$

It is well-known that there exists a unique solution to the above system of equations, which corresponds to optimal policies. In particular, one approach to computing this unique solution is by using the following LP (linear program) formulation, where $V(s)$ are the variables; The optimal value of this LP directly gives the cumulative reward of optimal policies under initial state distribution $\mathbf{z}$.

$$\min_V \quad \sum_{s \in S} z_s \cdot V(s) \tag{4}$$
$$\text{s.t.} \quad V(s) \geq R^*(s, \mathbf{x}) + \gamma \cdot \sum_{s' \in S} P^*(s, \mathbf{x}, s') \cdot V(s')$$
$$\forall s \in S, \mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s \tag{4a}$$

The issue with this LP formulation is that there may be infinitely many constraints as (4a) must hold for all $\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s$.

This differs from MDPs with a finite action space, in which case constraints in the LP formulation can be reduced to a finite set, where each constraint corresponds to an action. This issue can be addressed by using the *ellipsoid method* as shown in the proof sketch below. More practically, we can also derive a concise LP formulation by exploiting the duality principle; we leave the details to the full version of the paper.

Theorem 1. OPTSIG-MYOP *is solvable in polynomial time.*

Proof sketch. We show that the LP formulation (4) can be solved in polynomial time by using the ellipsoid method. The key to applying the ellipsoid method to solving an LP is to implement a polynomial-time *separation oracle*, which for any given assignment of values of the variables (in our problem values of $V(s)$) decides if all the constraints of the LP are satisfied, or outputs a violated one.

To implement the separation oracle for our problem amounts to solving the following optimization for all $s \in S$:

$$\max_{\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s} \quad R^*(s, \mathbf{x}) + \gamma \cdot \sum_{s' \in S} P^*(s, \mathbf{x}, s') \cdot V(s') - V(s).$$

By checking if the above maximum value is positive, we can identify if (4a) is violated for some $\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{A}_s$. Indeed, the set of IC action advices can be characterized by the constraints in (2), which are linear if we expand $\Pr(\theta | g_a, \pi_s)$ according to (1) and eliminate the denominator (where we also treat $\pi_s(\theta, g_a)$ as the additional variables and add the constraint $x(\theta, a) = \mu_s(\theta) \cdot \pi_s(\theta, g_a)$ for every θ and a). $\qquad\square$

4 When Agent is Far-sighted

A far-sighted (FS) agent looks beyond the immediate reward and considers the cumulative reward with discount factor $\tilde{\gamma}$. We now study signaling strategy design against an FS agent.

4.1 Optimal Signaling against FS Agent

When facing an FS agent, we cannot define an inducible set $\mathcal{A}_s$ independently for each state. The principal needs to take a global view and aim to induce the agent to use a *policy* that benefits the principal. We term the problem of optimal signaling strategy design against an FS agent OPTSIG-FS.

Best Response of FS Agent We start with the problem from the agent's perspective. When the principal commits to a signaling strategy π, the problem facing the agent can be formulated as an MDP $\mathcal{M}^\pi = \left\langle S \times G, A, P^\pi, \widetilde{R}^\pi \right\rangle$, where in each step the agent observes the state $s \in S$ of $\mathcal{M}$ along with a signal $g \in G$ from the principal. (s, g) constitutes a state in $\mathcal{M}^\pi$; call it a *meta-state* to distinguish it from states in $\mathcal{M}$. From the agent's perspective, after they take action a, the meta-state transitions to (s', g') with probability

$$P^\pi((s, g), a, (s', g')) = P(s, a, s') \cdot \sum_{\theta' \in \Theta} \mu_{s'}(\theta') \cdot \pi_{s'}(\theta', g'),$$
$$\tag{5}$$

i.e., a next state s' is sampled from $P(s, a, \cdot)$ as in $\mathcal{M}$, then a new external parameter θ' is sampled from $\mu_{s'}$ and the principal sends a signal $g \sim \pi_{s'}(\theta')$. Meanwhile, the following reward is yielded:

$$\widetilde{R}^\pi((s, g), a) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta \sim \Pr(\cdot | g, \pi_s)} \widetilde{R}(s, \theta, a), \tag{6}$$

where the posterior belief $\Pr(\theta|g, \pi_s)$ is defined in (1).

Hence, an optimal policy $\sigma : S \times G \to A$ for $\mathcal{M}^\pi$ defines a best response of the agent against π. Correspondingly, the principal receives the cumulative reward for executing σ in $\mathcal{M}^\pi$, where a reward $R^\pi((s,g),a) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta\sim\Pr(\cdot|g,\pi_s)}R(s,\theta,a)$ is obtained in each step. An optimal signaling strategy of the principal maximizes the cumulative reward, over all its policies against the best response.

Inapproximability We show that OPTSIG-FS is highly intractable: even to find an approximate solution to OPTSIG-FS requires solving an NP-hard problem. Hence, it is unlikely that there exists any efficient approximation algorithm for this task, assuming that P=NP is unlikely.

Theorem 2. *Assuming that $P \neq NP$, then* OPTSIG-FS *does not admit any polynomial-time $\frac{1}{\lambda^{1-\epsilon}}$-approximation algorithm for any constant $\epsilon > 0$, where λ is the number of states $s \in S$ in which the prior distribution μ_s is non-deterministic (i.e., supported on at least two external parameters). This holds even when $|\Theta| = 2$ and the discount factors $\gamma, \tilde\gamma \in (0,1)$ are fixed.*

The proof of the above theorem is via a reduction to the MAXIMUM INDEPENDENT SET problem,[3] which is known to be NP-hard to approximate (Zuckerman 2006). The result may also be of independent interest: It can be easily adapted to show the inapproximability of several related problems in the principal-agent setting. This hardness result also shows a "phase transition" between the cases where $\tilde\gamma = 0$ and $\tilde\gamma > 0$ given the tractability of OPTSIG-MYOP we showed in Section 3.

4.2 Advice-myopic Agent

The intractability of OPTSIG-FS leads us to consider *advice-myopic (AM)* agents, who account for their future rewards like a far-sighted agent does, but who behave myopically and ignore any of the principal's future signals. In other words, they always assume that the principal will disappear in the next step and rely only on their prior knowledge to estimate their future payoff. We write OPTSIG-AM for the optimal signaling strategy problem against an AM agent.

Equivalence to the Myopic Setting The fact that an AM agent does not consider future signals means that their future reward is independent of the principal's signaling strategy. This allows us to define a set of inducible (θ, a) distributions independently for each state as we did when dealing with a myopic agent. In other words, an AM agent is equivalent to a myopic agent, who adds a fixed value to their reward function, and this fixed value is the best future reward they can achieve without the help of any signals (which is independent of the signaling strategy used and can be calculated beforehand). Let $\widetilde{R}^+ : S \times \Theta \times A \to \mathbb{R}$ be the reward function of this equivalent myopic agent. We have

$$\widetilde{R}^+(s,\theta,a) = \widetilde{R}(s,\theta,a) + \tilde\gamma \cdot \mathbb{E}_{s'\sim P(s,a,\cdot)}\overline{V}(s',g_0), \quad (7)$$

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[3]All the omitted proofs can be found in the full version of this paper.

where $\overline{V}$ is the optimal value function of the agent when completely uninformative signals are given. In more detail, let $\perp: \Theta \to \Delta(G)$ be a completely uninformative signaling strategy, with $\perp(\theta) = \hat{\mathbf{e}}_{g_0}$ for all θ (i.e., it always sends the same signal g_0). Then $\overline{V}$ is the optimal value function for the MDP $\mathcal{M}^\perp = \left\langle S \times \{g_0\}, A, P^\perp, \widetilde{R}^\perp \right\rangle$, defined as in Section 4.1 with $\pi = \perp$. Hence, the Bellman equation gives

$$\overline{V}(s,g_0)$$
$$= \max_{a\in A}\left(\widetilde{R}^\perp(s,\theta,a) + \tilde\gamma \cdot \mathbb{E}_{(s',g_0)\sim P^\perp((s,g_0),a,\cdot)}\overline{V}(s',g_0) \right)$$
$$= \max_{a\in A}\left(\mathbb{E}_{\theta\sim\mu_s}\widetilde{R}(s,\theta,a) + \tilde\gamma \cdot \mathbb{E}_{s'\sim P(s,a,\cdot)}\overline{V}(s',g_0) \right) \quad (8)$$

for all $s \in S$, where the second transition follows by (5) and (6) and we also use the facts that the posterior belief $\Pr(\cdot|g, \perp)$ degenerates to the prior $\mu_s(\cdot)$ as $\perp$ is uninformative, and that $P^\perp((s,g_0),a,(s',g_0)) = P(s,a,s')$ as the state only transitions among the ones in the form (s,g_0).

We can compute $\overline{V}$ efficiently by solving the above Bellman equation. (A standard LP approach suffices given that $\mathcal{M}^\perp$ has a finite action space.) Then we obtain $\widetilde{R}^+$ according to (7), with which we can construct an equivalent OPTSIG-MYOP instance and solve it using our algorithm in Section 3. The solution also solves the original OPTSIG-AM instance as we argued above; we state this result in the theorem below and omit the proof.

Theorem 3. OPTSIG-AM *is solvable in polynomial time.*

4.3 Threat-based Action Advice against FS Agent

Now that we can efficiently solve OPTSIG-AM, we will show that we can use a solution to OPTSIG-AM to efficiently design a signaling strategy against an FS agent. More surprisingly, we can prove that this strategy guarantees the principal the same payoff they can obtain as if they were playing against an AM agent (when the agent is actually FS). The idea is to use a threat along with an action advice: if the agent does not follow an advised action, then the principal will stop providing any information in future steps (equivalently, switching to strategy $\perp$). Essentially, this amounts to a one-memory strategy, denoted $\varpi = (\varpi_s)_{s\in S}$, where each $\varpi_s : S \times \Theta \times G \times A \to \Delta(A)$ also depends on the signal and the action taken in the previous step.

More formally, suppose that $\pi = (\pi_s)_{s\in S}$ is a solution to OPTSIG-AM, which without loss of generality is an IC action advice. We construct a one-memory strategy:

$$\varpi_s((s,\theta),g,a) = \begin{cases} \pi_s(\theta), & \text{if } g \in \{g_a, null\} \\ \perp(\theta) = \hat{\mathbf{e}}_{g_0}, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (9)$$

where g and a are the signal and action taken in the previous step (assume that g is initialized to *null* in the first step); each signal g_a advises the agent to take the corresponding action a, and g_0 is a signal that does not correspond to any action.

Our key finding is that, via this simple threat-based mechanism, the strategy ϖ we design is persuasive for an FS agent: the threat it makes effectively incentivizes an FS agent to take advised actions. To show this, we first analyze the problem facing the agent when the principal commits to ϖ.

Best Response to ϖ From an FS agent's perspective, the principal committing to ϖ results in an MDP $\mathcal{M}^\varpi = \left\langle S \times G, A, P^\varpi, \widetilde{R}^\varpi \right\rangle$. We have $G = \{g_0\} \cup G_A$, so each meta-state (s, g) in $\mathcal{M}^\varpi$ consists of a state of $\mathcal{M}$ and a signal from the principal. The transition dynamics depend on whether the signal sent in the current state is g_0 or not (i.e., whether the principal has switched to the threat):

- For all $(s, g_a) \in S \times G_A$, the agent following the advised action a results in transition:

$$P^\varpi((s, g_a), a, \cdot) = P^\pi((s, g_a), a, \cdot); \quad (10\text{a})$$

otherwise, i.e., if action $b \neq a$ is taken, the principal will send g_0 in the next step. Hence,

$$P^\varpi((s, g_a), b, (s', g))$$
$$= \begin{cases} \sum_{g' \in G} P^\pi((s, g_a), a, (s', g')), & \text{if } g = g_0 \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (10\text{b})$$

- For all $(s, g_0) \in S \times \{g_0\}$, the threat is activated in these meta-states, we have:

$$P^\varpi((s, g_0), a, (s', g')) = P^\perp((s, g_0), a, (s', g'))$$
$$= \begin{cases} P(s, a, s'), & \text{if } g' = g_0 \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (10\text{c})$$

Similarly, the reward function differs in meta-states (s, g_a) and (s, g_0). We have

$$\widetilde{R}^\varpi((s, g), \cdot) = \begin{cases} \widetilde{R}^\pi((s, g), \cdot), & \text{if } g \in G_A \\ \widetilde{R}^\perp((s, g_0), \cdot), & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

Persuasiveness of ϖ To show the persuasiveness of ϖ, we argue that the following policy $\sigma : S \times G \to A$ of the agent, by which the agent always takes the advised action, is optimal in response to ϖ. For all $s \in S$, we define

$$\sigma(s, g) = \begin{cases} a, & \text{if } g = g_a \in G_A \\ \bar{\sigma}(s, g_0), & \text{if } g = g_0 \end{cases} \quad (12)$$

where $\bar{\sigma}$ is an optimal policy against $\perp$, the value function $\overline{V} : S \times G \to \mathbb{R}$ of which (as from the agent's perspective) is defined in Section 4.2 and satisfies (8).

Our next result, Theorem 4, demonstrates the optimality of σ. Intuitively, the value function of σ is at least as large as the optimal value function in the case when the principal reveals no information.

Theorem 4. *The policy σ defined in (12) is an optimal response of an FS agent to ϖ. (Hence, ϖ incentivizes an FS agent to take the advised action.)*

The direct consequence of Theorem 4 is that ϖ guarantees the principal the best payoff they can obtain when facing an AM agent, when the agent they actually face is FS (Corollary 5). Hence, ϖ serves as an alternative approach to deal with an FS agent. As a final remark, the threat-based strategy we designed may not be an optimal one-memory strategy. Indeed, with minor changes to our proof of Theorem 2, we

can show that the problem of computing an optimal finite-memory strategy is inapproximable (see the full version of the paper). In the myopic and advice-myopic settings, the optimal non-memory signaling strategies we design remain optimal even when we consider memory-based strategies as the agent's behavior is Markovian.

Corollary 5. *By using ϖ against an FS agent, the principal's cumulative reward is the same as the highest cumulative reward they can obtain against an AM agent.*

5 Experiments

We empirically evaluate signaling strategies obtained with our algorithms. The goal is to compare the payoffs yielded for the principal. We use Python (v3.9) to implement our algorithms and Gurobi (v9.1.2) to solve all the LPs. All results were obtained on a platform with a 2 GHz Quad-Core CPU and 16 GB memory, and are averaged over at least 20 instances. We conduct experiments on (i) general instances without any specific underlying structure, and (ii) instances generated based on a road navigation application.

General Instances The first set of results are obtained with randomly generated general instances. The transition probabilities and the initial state distribution are generated uniformly at random (and normalized to ensure that they sum up to 1). We also set an integer parameter n^*, and change n^* states to terminal states. The reward values are first generated uniformly at random from the range $[0, 1]$. Then, we tune the agent's rewards according to a parameter $\beta \in [-1, 1]$, setting $\widetilde{R}(s, \theta, a) \leftarrow (1 - |\beta|) \cdot \widetilde{R}(s, \theta, a) + \beta \cdot R(s, \theta, a)$. Hence, when $\beta = 0$, the agent's rewards are independent of the principal's; when $\beta = 1$, they are completely aligned; and when $\beta = -1$, they are zero-sum.

We evaluate optimal signaling strategies against a myopic and an AM agent; the latter is equivalent to our threat-based strategy against an FS agent (THREAT-FS). We use two benchmarks, which are by nature also the lower and upper bounds of payoffs of other strategies: i) when the principal cannot send any signal and the agent operates with only the prior knowledge (NOSIG-MYOP and NOSIG-AM/FS; AM and FS agents have the same behavior in this case); and ii) when the principal has full control over the agent (FULL-CONTROL). For ease of comparison, all results are shown as their ratios to results of FULLCONTROL.

Figure 2 summarizes the results. It is clearly seen that OPTSIG improves significantly upon NOSIG in all figures. The gap appears to increase with β, and when $\beta \geq 0$ (when the agent's rewards are positively correlated to that of the principal), OPTSIG is very closed to FULLCONTROL. It is also noted that differences between results obtained in the myopic setting and in the FS/AM setting are very small (e.g., compare (a) and (b)). This is mainly due to the random nature of the instances: in expectation, future rewards of all actions are the same. Hence, in the remaining figures we only present results obtained in the myopic setting. As shown in these figures, payoff improvement offered by the optimal strategies increases slowly with the number of actions and the number of external parameters. Intuitively, as these two
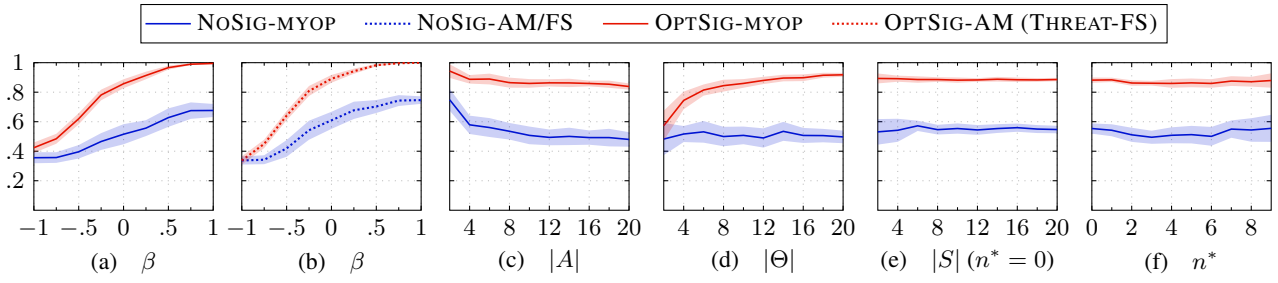
Figure 2: Comparison of signaling strategies: all results are shown as ratios to FULLCONTROL on the y-axes. Meanings of x-axes are noted in the captions. Shaded areas represent standard deviations (mean $\pm$ standard deviation). In all figures, we fix $|S| = |\Theta| = |A| = 10$, $\gamma = \tilde{\gamma} = 0.8$, $n^* = 5$, and $\beta = 0$ unless they are variables.
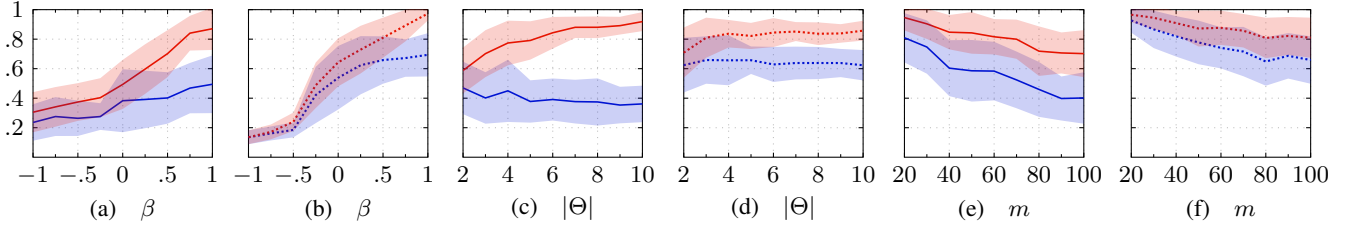

Figure 3: Comparison of signaling strategies in a navigation application: all results are shown as the ratios of FULLCONTROL to them on the y-axes (now that rewards are costs). All curves have the same meanings shown on the legend to Figure 2. Meanings of x-axes are noted in the captions. Shaded areas represent standard deviations (mean $\pm$ standard deviation). All results are obtained on instances with $n = 20$ and $m = 100$ (i.e., numbers of nodes and edges in the network), where we also fix $|\Theta| = 3$, $\gamma = \tilde{\gamma} = 0.8$, and $\beta = 0.5$ unless they are variables.

numbers increase, the agent's decision making in each state becomes more reliant on advice from the principal. Nevertheless, the results do not appear to vary insignificantly with other parameters, such as the number of states or the number of terminal states as shown in (e) and (f) (also see the full version of the paper for additional experiment results).

Road Navigation Instances In the navigation application, the agent wants to travel from a starting node to a destination node on a road network, and is free to choose any path. In each step, the agent picks a road at the current node and travels through it. The reward the agent receives at each step is a *cost* representing the travel time through the chosen road, which depends on the congestion level represented by the external parameter. The principal, as a social planner, has a preference over the path the agent picks (e.g., in consideration of the traffic congestion or noise levels across the city), and this is encoded in a reward function for the principal: whenever the agent picks a road, the principal also receives a cost according to this reward function. Naturally, the agent's position (the node the agent is on) defines the state of the MDP. For simplicity, we assume that the road network is a directed acyclic graph (DAG), so the agent always reaches the destination in a finite number of steps.

To generate an instance, we first generate a random DAG with specified numbers of nodes and edges (roads). Let these numbers be n and m, respectively ($n \le m \le \frac{n(n-1)}{2}$). We sample a Prüfer sequence of length $n - 2$ uniformly at random and then convert it into the corresponding tree. We index the nodes according to their order in a breadth-first

search. The node with the smallest/largest index is chosen as the start/destination. Then we add an edge between a pair of nodes chosen uniformly at random, from the node with the smaller index to the node with the larger index, until there are m edges on the graph. In the case that some node has no outgoing edge and it is not the destination, we also add an edge linking this node to the destination, so the graph generated may actually have more than m edges. In this way the graph generated is always a DAG.

The results are presented in Figures 3. The results exhibit similar patterns to their counterparts in Figures 2. Nevertheless, the gaps between different strategies appear to be narrower in the FS/AM setting than those in the myopic setting, which is not obvious in Figures 2.

6 Conclusion

We described and studied a dynamic model of persuasion in infinite horizon Markov processes. Our main results characterize the nature and computational complexity of optimal signaling against different types of agents. A limitation of the current model is that it requires common knowledge of transitions and rewards; studying online versions of our problem (Castiglioni et al. 2020) is an immediate future step. While we focus on the algorithmic aspects of persuasion in sequential decision-making, our results indicate how a social planner might influence agents optimally. In particular implementations, the planner's incentives may not be aligned with societal benefits. In these cases, a careful analysis of the persuasion mechanisms and their moral legitimacy must be considered.

Acknowledgments

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