BIOINFORMATICS APPLICATIONS NOTE
Vol. 28 no. 6 2012, pages 884–885
doi:10.1093/bioinformatics/bts052

Gene expression
Advance Access publication January 28, 2012

Measurement of genome-wide RNA synthesis and decay rates with Dynamic Transcriptome Analysis (DTA)

Björn Schwalb*, Daniel Schulz, Mai Sun, Benedikt Zacher, Sebastian Dümcke, Dietmar E. Martin, Patrick Cramer and Achim Tresch

Gene Center Munich and Department of Biochemistry, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Feodor-Lynen-Str. 25, 81377 Munich, Germany

Associate Editor: Ivo Hofacker

ABSTRACT

Summary: Standard transcriptomics measures total cellular RNA levels. Our understanding of gene regulation would be greatly improved if we could measure RNA synthesis and decay rates on a genome-wide level. To that end, the Dynamic Transcriptome Analysis (DTA) method has been developed. DTA combines metabolic RNA labeling with standard transcriptomics to measure RNA synthesis and decay rates in a precise and non-perturbing manner. Here, we present the open source **R**/*Bioconductor* software package *DTA*. It implements all required bioinformatics steps that allow the accurate absolute quantification and comparison of RNA turnover.

Availability: *DTA* is part of **R**/*Bioconductor*. To download and install *DTA* refer to http://bioconductor.org/packages/2.10/bioc/html/DTA.html

Contact: schwalb@lmb.uni-muenchen.de

Received on November 3, 2011; revised on December 23, 2011; accepted on January 23, 2012

1 INTRODUCTION

Total RNA levels are a consequence of RNA synthesis and decay. These individual contributions can be monitored by Dynamic Transcriptome Analysis (DTA, Amorim *et al*., 2010, Friedel *et al*., 2010, Miller *et al*., 2011). DTA requires culturing cells in the presence of a labeling substrate (e.g. 4sU or 4tU). During a short, non-perturbing RNA labeling pulse, cells incorporate 4tUTP into newly transcribed RNA instead of uridine. This setup yields three types of RNA fractions: *total* cellular RNA, newly transcribed *labeled* RNA and pre-existing *unlabeled* RNA. The quantification of these fractions on microarrays or by RNA-seq is used to estimate RNA synthesis and decay rates on a genome-wide scale, assuming exponential decay. For each RNA g, the synthesis rate μ_g and the decay rate λ_g are estimated from the equations

$$e^{-(\lambda_g+\alpha)t} = \frac{U_g}{T_g} = 1 - \frac{L_g}{T_g}, \quad T_g = \frac{\mu_g}{\lambda_g+\alpha}, \quad \alpha = \frac{log(2)}{CCL},$$

where t is the labeling duration, CCL the cell cycle length, and L_g, U_g, T_g are the measurements of the labeled, unlabeled and total RNA fractions, respectively. α can be set to 0 in the case of primary cells (e.g. macrophages). It has been shown that DTA has higher sensitivity and higher temporal resolution in detecting gene regulatory changes than standard transcriptomics (Miller *et al*., 2011). One of the technical obstacles of standard transcriptomics is the unknown normalization factor between samples, i.e. wild-type and mutant cells. Variations in RNA extraction efficiencies and amplification steps in the biochemical protocol introduce differences in the global intensity levels. The estimation of the normalization factors limits the precision of DTA. We have extended DTA to comparative DTA (cDTA), to eliminate this obstacle (Sun *et al*., 2011). cDTA allows for direct comparison of RNA synthesis and decay rates between samples. This is done by mixing an internal normalization standard of *Schizosaccharomyces pombe* (*Sp*) cells to samples of wild-type or perturbed *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (*Sc*) cells. Here, we present the **R**/*Bioconductor* package *DTA*. It implements all required methods to estimate RNA synthesis and decay rates from pre-processed microarray or RNA-Seq measurements of any organisms that are obtained via the DTA or the cDTA protocol.

2 IMPLEMENTATION AND AVAILABILITY

DTA is implemented in **R** (version $\geq$ 2.14, Ihaka *et al*., 1996) and is part of *Bioconductor* (version $\geq$ 2.10, Gentleman *et al*., 2004). To download and install *DTA* and all its dependencies refer to http://bioconductor.org/packages/2.10/bioc/html/DTA.html.

Other methods to infer RNA decay rates from gene expression data have been published by Friedel *et al*. (2010) and Rabani *et al*. (2010). So far, only Friedel *et al*. (2010) have provided a Java implementation of their estimation procedure. The *DTA* package is the first to cover all aspects of the RNA labeling technique: Bias correction, detailed visualization of quality control aspects and proper handling of the results. It contains simulation methods and functions for error estimation based on replicates and resampling. Further it contains four example datasets for Yeast, Mouse and Human (Doelken *et al*., 2008; Miller *et al*., 2011; Sun *et al*., 2011).

3 USAGE AND APPLICATION

DTA can be used for genome-wide synthesis and decay rate estimation under all kinds of perturbations and for all kinds of organisms. The rate extraction procedure can be easily accessed via the core function `DTA.estimate`. Its input consists of a matrix containing the normalized measurements of the total, labeled and unlabeled RNA fractions (`datamat`) and a description of the experimental design (`phenomat`). For a more detailed explanation of the required objects, we refer to the package vignette. In addition to this, the number of uridines in each transcript is needed for

*To whom correspondence should be addressed.

© The Author 2012. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. For Permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com

Downloaded from http://bioinformatics.oxfordjournals.org/ at Generalverwaltung der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft on February 25, 2014

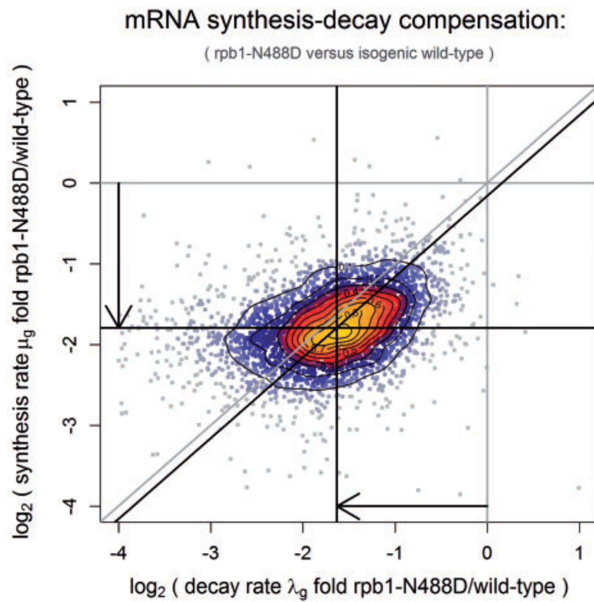

Fig. 1. Heatscatter plot of the changes in RNA decay rates (log fold, x-axis) versus the changes in RNA synthesis rates (log fold, y-axis) in the rpb1-N488D strain versus its isogenic wild-type. The parallel offsets of the black lines to their gray counterparts indicate the median changes of synthesis rates (horizontal), decay rates (vertical), or total RNA levels (diagonal) by a factor of 0.31, 0.25, and 0.77, respectively. The coloring indicates the local point density.

labeling bias assessment. This data is part of our package for a number of model organisms such as yeast, drosophila, mouse and human (`Sc.tnumber` etc.). Optionally, a vector of transcripts that are considered valid for parameter estimation (`reliable`) can be specified. We illustrate the functionality of DTA on a dataset from (Sun *et al*., 2011), which compares an RNA Polymerase II *Sc* point mutant with a reduced elongation rate to wild-type *Sc*. As expected, synthesis rates are globally decreased, but surprisingly this is compensated by a global reduction in decay rates (Fig. 1). The **R**-objects required for this analysis are included in the *DTA* package.

```
> library(DTA)
> data(Sun2011)
```

The raw data is first normalized, mapped to Yeast ORF IDs and then the estimation procedure `DTA.estimate` generates a series of quality control plots, if `check = TRUE`. These are absolutely essential to check the reliability of the results. RStudio users should consider the parameter `RStudio`.

```
> cDTA.datamat = DTA.normalize(Raw.datamat,
  Sp.affy.reliable)
> Sc.datamat = DTA.map.it(cDTA.datamat,
  map = Sc.affy2ensg)
> Wt = DTA.estimate(Wt.phenomat,Sc.datamat,
  Sc.tnumber,Sc.ensg.reliable,ccl = 93.5,
  LtoTratio = 0.05,check = FALSE)
> Pol = DTA.estimate(Pol.phenomat,Sc.datamat,
  Sc.tnumber,Sc.ensg.reliable,ccl = 149.8,
  LtoTratio = 0.05,check = FALSE)
```

Note that it is advisable to experimentally determine the median cell cycle length (`ccl`) of a sample if appropriate as a correction factor. Additionally, the ratio of labeled to total mRNA can be passed to the estimation procedure to yield the reported median wild-type mRNA half-lives of (Miller *et al*., 2011). The same ratio is then used to estimate the mRNA half-lives of the rpb1-N488D strain (`Pol`). This is reasonable as the data has been pre-processed via added *Sp* cells (`DTA.normalize`). To yield Figure 1, just execute the following:

```
> r = Sc.ensg.reliable
> x = log2(Pol$"6"$"dr"[r]/Wt$"6"$"dr"[r])
> y = log2(Pol$"6"$"sr"[r]/Wt$"6"$"sr"[r])
> heatscatter(x,y,xlim=c(-4,1),ylim=c(-4,1))
```

4 CONCLUSION

The *DTA* package delivers straightforward methods to estimate RNA synthesis and decay rates from pre-processed microarray or RNA-Seq measurements that are obtained via the *DTA/cDTA* protocol. The *DTA* package fulfills the high standard of the *Bioconductor* platform, regarding documentation and usability. It can therefore be easily incorporated in R scripts for pre-processing and further statistical analysis of the results can readily be carried out by other methods within the **R**/*Bioconductor* programming environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Kerstin C. Maier, Martin Seizl, Laurent Larivière, Nicole Pirkl and Stefanie Etzold (Gene Center Munich) for stimulating discussions and great experimental work.

Funding: A.T. was supported by the LMU*excellent* guest professorship ‘Computational Biochemistry.’ P.C. was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, SFB646, TR5, FOR1068, NIM, the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO), an Advanced Investigator Grant of the European Research Council, a LMU*excellent* research professorship ‘Molecular systems biology of gene regulation’, the LMU*innovativ* project Bioimaging Network (BIN), and the Jung-Stiftung.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

REFERENCES

Amorim,M.J. *et al.* (2010) Global coordination of transcriptional control and RNA decay during cellular differentiation. *Mol. Syst. Biol.*, **6**, 380.

Doelken,L. *et al.* (2008) High-resolution gene expression profiling for simultaneous kinetic parameter analysis of RNA synthesis and decay. *RNA*, **14**, 1959–1972.

Friedel,C.C. *et al.* (2010) HALO - a Java framework for precise transcript half-life determination. *Bioinformatics*, **26**, 1264–1266.

Gentleman,R.C. *et al.* (2004) Bioconductor: open software development for computational biology and bioinformatics. *Genome Biol.*, **5**, R80.

Ihaka,R. and Gentleman,R. (1996) R: a language for data analysis and graphics. *J. Comput. Graph. Stat.*, **5**, 299–314.

Miller,C. *et al.* (2011) Dynamic Transcriptome Analysis measures rates of mRNA synthesis and decay in yeast, *Mol. Syst. Biol.*, **7**, 458.

Rabani,M. *et al.* (2010) Metabolic labeling of RNA uncovers principles of RNA production and degradation dynamics in mammalian cells, *Nat. Biotech.*, **29**, 436–442.

Sun,M. *et al.* (2011) Comparative Dynamic Transcriptome Analysis (cDTA) reveals mutual feedback between RNA synthesis and degradation. *Gen. Res*, in press.

Downloaded from http://bioinformatics.oxfordjournals.org/ at Generalverwaltung der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft on February 25, 2014