tweeDEseq: analysis of RNA-seq data using the Poisson-Tweedie family of distributions

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1 Getting started

This document gives an overview of the R package tweeDEseq, which provides statistical procedures for testing differential expression in RNA-seq count data. In fact, these procedures could be applied, in principle, to any kind of count data, other than RNA-seq. The tweeDEseq package offers a function for normalizing count data which actually calls other functions for that purpose from the edgeR package. For this reason, it is necessary to have installed the edgeR package as well, although it is not necessary to explicitly load it onto the session. Another package necessary for running this vignette is the tweeDEseqCountData package which contains data to illustrate the analyses and which is employed in the article introducing tweeDEseq by Esnaola et al. (2013). Therefore, we should start the R session with loading these libraries as follows:

> library(tweeDEseq)
> library(tweeDEseqCountData)

We will start loading into the workspace the data corresponding to the initial table of raw counts of the RNA-seq experiment from Pickrell et al. (2010) on lymphoblastoid cell lines derived from 69 unrelated nigerian individuals as well as a vector of gender labels for each sample matching the sample order in the table of counts:

```
> data(pickrell)
> countsNigerian <- exprs(pickrell.eset)
> dim(countsNigerian)
[1] 52580 69
> countsNigerian[1:5, 1:5]
```

```
NA18486 NA18498 NA18499 NA18501 NA18502
ENSG0000000003
                       0
                               0
                                        0
                                                 0
                                                          \cap
ENSG0000000005
                       0
                                0
                                         0
                                                 0
                                                          0
ENSG0000000419
                      22
                              105
                                        40
                                                55
                                                         67
ENSG0000000457
                      22
                              100
                                       107
                                                53
                                                         72
ENSG0000000460
                       5
                               23
                                        10
                                                18
                                                         15
> genderNigerian <- pData(pickrell.eset)[, "gender"]</pre>
> head(genderNigerian)
[1] male
           male
                   female male
                                  female male
Levels: female male
> table(genderNigerian)
genderNigerian
female
         male
    40
           29
```

2 Normalization and filtering

We proceed to normalize this initial table of raw counts in order to try to remove any technical biases that might be affecting the data. The tweeDEseq package relies for this purpose on part of the functionality provided by the edgeR package (comprising RNA composition adjustment by TMM (Robinson and Oshlack, 2010) and quantile-to-quantile count adjustment (Robinson et al., 2007) produced by the equalizeLibSizes() from edgeR) and offers one function (normalizeCounts()) that makes the appropriate calls to edgeR to normalize these data.

```
> countsNigerianNorm <- normalizeCounts(countsNigerian, genderNigerian)</p>
```

```
> dim(countsNigerianNorm)
```

[1] 10231 69

If more control is needed in this step, the user should directly employ the corresponding edgeR functions. Next, we can filter out genes with very low expression using the function filterCounts() whose default parameters remove those genes with less than 5 counts per million in all samples but one.

```
> countsNigerianNorm <- filterCounts(countsNigerianNorm)
> dim(countsNigerianNorm)
```

[1] 10231 69

3 The Poisson-Tweedie family of distributions to model RNA-seq count data

The package tweeDEseq uses the Poisson-Tweedie (PT) family of distributions as the statistical model for count data. PT distributions have been studied by several authors(Hougaard et al., 1997; Gupta and Ong, 2004; Puig and Valero, 2006; El-Shaarawi et al., 2011) and unify several count data distributions (see Fig. 1 in El-Shaarawi *et al.*, 2011) such as Poisson, negative binomial, Poisson-Inverse Gaussian,

Pólya-Aeppli or Neyman type A. These distributions can model different scenarios as, for instance, a RNA-seq expression profile with a wide dynamic range leading to a heavy tail in the distribution.

Following El-Shaarawi et al. (2011), let $Y \sim PT(a,b,c)$ be a PT random variable with vector of parameters $\theta = (a,b,c)^T$ defined in the domain

$$\Theta = (-\infty, 1] \times (0, +\infty) \times [0, 1).$$
⁽¹⁾

For the sake of interpretability, we reparametrize $\theta = (a, b, c)$ to $\theta = (\mu, \phi, a)$, where μ denotes the mean, $\phi = \sigma^2/\mu$ is the dispersion index (σ^2 is the variance), and *a* the shape parameter that is employed to define some count data distributions that are particular cases of PT such as Poisson or Negative Binomial. The relationship between both parameterizations is the following:

$$c = \frac{\phi - 1}{\phi - a}, \quad b = \frac{\mu (1 - a)^{(1 - a)}}{(\phi - 1)(d - a)^{-a}}.$$
(2)

Under this parametrization, the shape parameter determines the specific count data distribution being employed. For instance a = 1 corresponds to Poisson and a = 0 corresponds to negative binomial. We can estimate the parameter vector θ by maximum likelihood through the function mlePoissonTweedie() as follows:

where here we have simulated 1000 random observations from a negative binomial distribution and the last call to getParam() allows us to extract the $\hat{\theta}$ vector from the object return by mlePoissonTweedie().

4 Goodness of fit to a count data distribution

The PT distribution allows one to test for the goodness of fit to a particular count data distribution defined by a specific value of the PT shape parameter a. For this purpose, the function testShapePT() allows us to test the goodness of fit to, for instance, the widely used negative binomial distribution (i.e., $H_0: a = 0$) as illustrated here with the previously estimated vector $\hat{\theta}$:

```
> testShapePT(thetahat, a=0)
$statistic
[1] 0.01471032
$pvalue
[1] 0.9034644
```

These functions are called from another one called gofTest() which can perform for us a goodness-offit for every gene in the rows of a given matrix of counts, and will return the corresponding χ_1^2 statistics. Since calculating this for the entire gene set would take too long for building quickly this vignette we are going to work on a subset of genes formed by human genes with documented sex-specific expression, a sampled subset of 25 human housekeeping genes and the secretin (*SCT*) gene which encodes for an endocrine hormone peptide in chromosome 11 that controls secretions in the duodenum. The genderrelated and housekeeping gene lists form part from the previously loaded experimental data package tweeDEseqCountData and can be loaded as follows:

```
> data(genderGenes)
> data(hkGenes)
> length(XiEgenes)
[1] 63
> length(msYgenes)
[1] 32
> length(hkGenes)
[1] 669
```

The list of genes with documented sex-specific expression was built by first selecting genes in chromosome X that escape X-inactivation (Carrel and Willard, 2005) and genes in the male-specific region of the Y chrosomome (Skaletsky et al., 2003), and then filtering out those that do not occur in the initial table of counts with 52580 Ensembl genes. The list of housekeeping genes was retrieved from the literature(Eisenberg and Levanon, 2003) and then also filtered to keep only those genes that form part of the initial table of counts. The selection is finally done as follows:

[1] 41

Now, we calculate the goodness of fit to a negative binomial distribution for each of these 41 genes using the function gofTest():

```
> chi2gof <- gofTest(countsNigerianNorm[geneSubset, ], a=0)</pre>
```

and we can examine the result by means of the quantile-quantile plots produced with the function qqchisq() and shown in Figure 1, which indicates that more than a 50% of the genes show a substantial discrepancy with the respect to the negative binomial distribution.

```
> par(mfrow=c(1,2), mar=c(4, 5, 3, 4))
> qq <- qqchisq(chi2gof, main="Chi2 Q-Q Plot", ylim = c(0, 60))
> qq <- qqchisq(chi2gof, normal=TRUE, ylim = c(-5, 7))</pre>
```

This indicates that different genes may require different count data distributions but, in fact, this can be also observed for different sample groups within the same gene. Figure 2 illustrates such a case with the secretin (*SCT*) gene (Ensembl ID ENSG0000070031) when looking separately to male and female samples. This figure is produced with the following code that calls the function compareCountDist() which helps in comparing an empirical distribution of counts against the Poisson, the negative binomial and the corresponding estimated PT distribution.



Figure 1. Goodness of fit to a binomial distribution. On the left a quantile-quantile plot of the χ^2 statistic employed to assess the goodness-of-fit of the RNA-seq data to a negative binomial distribution is shown. More than a 50% of the genes have expression profiles that depart substantially from the negative binomial distribution. On the right we have the same data but χ^2 statistics are transformed into standard normal z-scores to improve visibility of the lower quantiles.

```
> par(mfrow=c(1,2), mar=c(4, 5, 3, 2))
```

```
> xf <- unlist(countsNigerianNorm["ENSG0000070031", genderNigerian=="female"])</pre>
```

```
> compareCountDist(xf, main="Female samples")
```

```
> xm <- unlist(countsNigerianNorm["ENSG0000070031", genderNigerian=="male"])</pre>
```

```
> compareCountDist(xm, main="Male samples")
```

What Figure 2 reflects can be also easily seen by just looking to the actual counts and identifying the female sample that produces the heavy tail on the distribution

```
> sort(xf)
```

```
NA19137 NA18855 NA19127 NA19159 NA19225 NA19257 NA18508 NA18511 NA18858 NA18912
                                2
                                         2
                                                  2
                                                          3
                                                                   3
                                                                            3
               2
                        2
                                                                                     3
      1
NA19102 NA19114 NA19116 NA18505 NA18909 NA19099
                                                   NA19140 NA19222 NA18517
                                                                              NA18520
      3
               3
                        3
                                4
                                         4
                                                  4
                                                           4
                                                                   4
                                                                            5
                                                                                     5
NA19131 NA19143 NA18523 NA18861 NA18870 NA19108 NA19152 NA19201 NA18499 NA19093
               5
                        6
      5
                                6
                                         6
                                                  6
                                                           6
                                                                   6
                                                                            8
                                                                                     9
NA19147 NA18852 NA19209 NA18502 NA19238 NA19190 NA19204 NA18916 NA19172 NA19193
      9
              11
                      11
                               12
                                        12
                                                16
                                                         17
                                                                  21
                                                                           37
                                                                                  196
```

```
> sort(xm)
```



Figure 2. Empirical cumulative distribution function (CDF) of counts (black dots), calculated separately from male and female samples, for the secretin gene (*SCT*) and estimated CDF (solid lines) of Poisson-Tweedie distributions with shape parameter fixed to a = 1 corresponding to a Poisson (green), a = 0 corresponding to a negative binomial (blue) and with the value of *a* estimated from data too (red). The legend shows the values of the *a* parameter and the *P* value of the likelihood ratio test on whether the expression profile follows a negative binomial distribution ($H_0 : a = 0$). We can observe that for both, male and female samples, the Poisson distribution is not adequate and that the negative binomial distribution is not adequate for female samples.

NA18522	NA18519	NA18498	NA19192	NA18510	NA19210	NA19160	NA19138	NA19128	NA18507
3	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
NA19098	NA19171	NA19153	NA18913	NA18853	NA18486	NA19239	NA18871	NA18862	NA18856
6	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3
	NA19144	NA19119	NA19203	NA19200	NA18504	NA19130	NA18501	NA19101	NA18516
	30	18	15	11	9	8	8	7	7

and realize that by just removing that sample, the large overexpression in females just vanishes:

```
> xf[which.max(xf)]
NA19193
196
> 2^{log2(mean(xf))-log2(mean(xm))}
[1] 2.003402
```

> 2^{log2(mean(xf[-which.max(xf)])) - log2(mean(xm))}

[1] 1.192384

This illustrates a case in which Poisson and negative binomial distributions may be too restrictive to account for the biological variability that extensively-replicated RNA-seq experiments can reveal in count data.

5 Testing for differential expression

In order to illustrate the accuracy of tweeDEseq for detecting DE genes in a extensively-replicated RNA-seq experiment we have compared the expression profiles between males and females from the population of 69 unrelated Nigerian individuals(Pickrell et al., 2010).

The tweeDEseq package contains a function to test for differential expression between two different conditions using a score based test: the tweeDE() function. This function takes as input a matrix of counts with genes on the rows and samples on the columns.

An important feature of the tweeDE() function is that it allows to use multiple processors in the computing process. This is done by loading first the multicore package and specifying the number of cores to be used with the mc.cores argument in the call to tweeDE().

> resPT <- tweeDE(countsNigerianNorm[geneSubset,], group = genderNigerian)</pre>

The function tweeDE() returns a *data.frame* object of class *tweeDE* which can be examined with the print():

```
> print (resPT)
```

```
Comparison of groups: male - female
Showing top 6 genes ranked by P-value
Minimum absolute log2 fold-change of 0
Maximum adjusted P-value of 1
                overallMean female
                                       male
                                                log2fc
                                                            stat
                                                                         pval
ENSG00000129824
                    186.942
                              3.275 440.276
                                             7.070769 16.028735 8.050548e-58
                                             3.558707 11.319513 1.050535e-29
ENSG0000154620
                     16.043
                              2.900 34.172
ENSG0000099749
                     31.464
                              3.550
                                     69.966
                                             4.300753 10.664342 1.494538e-26
ENSG00000198692
                     18.551
                              3.775
                                     38.931
                                              3.366372
                                                        9.717809 2.531693e-22
ENSG00000157828
                      7.507
                              1.875
                                     15.276 3.026291
                                                        7.968633 1.604387e-15
ENSG0000006757
                    152.101 196.175
                                     91.310 -1.103291
                                                        6.820705 9.059494e-12
                 pval.adjust
ENSG00000129824 3.300724e-56
ENSG00000154620 2.153598e-28
ENSG00000099749 2.042535e-25
ENSG00000198692 2.594986e-21
ENSG00000157828 1.315597e-14
ENSG0000006757 6.190654e-11
```

which will show us by default the top 6 genes ranked by *P*-value including information on the magnitude of the fold-change in log2 scale (log2fc), overall mean expression in counts (overallMean), mean expression in counts for each sample group, raw *P*-value (pval) and the Benjamini-Hochberg (FDR) adjusted *P*-value (pval.adjust).

The same print () function allows us to call differentially expressed a subset of gene meeting cutoffs on the minimum magnitude of the fold-change and maximum FDR and store that subset in a *data.frame* object by using the appropriate arguments as follows:

```
> deGenes <- print(resPT, n=Inf, log2fc=log2(1.5), pval.adjust=0.05, print=FALSE)
> dim(deGenes)
```

[1] 9 7

We can further enrich the output with information like the symbol and description of the gene by using the annotation information stored as a *data.frame* in the experimental data package tweeDEseqCountData as follows:

```
> data(annotEnsemb163)
> head(annotEnsembl63)
                Symbol Chr
                                           End EntrezID
                               Start
ENSG00000252775
                   U7
                         5 133913821 133913880
                                                    <NA>
ENSG00000207459
                    U6
                         5 133970529 133970635
                                                    <NA>
ENSG00000252899
                   U7
                         5 133997420 133997479
                                                    <NA>
ENSG00000201298
                    U6
                         5 134036862 134036968
                                                    <NA>
ENSG00000222266
                    U6
                         5 134051173 134051272
                                                    <NA>
ENSG00000222924
                    U6
                         5 137405044 137405147
                                                    <NA>
                                                     Description Length
ENSG00000252775 U7 small nuclear RNA [Source:RFAM;Acc:RF00066]
                                                                     NA
ENSG00000207459 U6 spliceosomal RNA [Source:RFAM; Acc:RF00026]
                                                                     NA
ENSG00000252899 U7 small nuclear RNA [Source:RFAM;Acc:RF00066]
                                                                     NΔ
ENSG00000201298 U6 spliceosomal RNA [Source:RFAM; Acc:RF00026]
                                                                     NA
ENSG00000222266
                U6 spliceosomal RNA
                                      [Source:RFAM; Acc:RF00026]
                                                                     NA
ENSG00000222924 U6 spliceosomal RNA
                                      [Source:RFAM; Acc:RF00026]
                                                                     NA
                GCcontent
ENSG00000252775
                       NA
ENSG00000207459
                       NA
ENSG00000252899
                       NA
ENSG00000201298
                       NA
ENSG00000222266
                       NA
ENSG00000222924
                       NA
```

> deGenes <- merge(deGenes, annotEnsembl63, by="row.names", sort=FALSE)</pre>

and select certain columns to build Table 1 using the xtable package (code not shown but available in the source of the vignette).

6 Visualizing the results

An informative way to visualize the results of a differential expression analysis is by means of MA and Volcano plots, which we can easily obtain through the tweeDEseq package functions MAPlot() and Vplot(), respectively as follows. Their result is shown in Figure 3.

```
> deGenes <- rownames(print(resPT, n=Inf, log2fc=log2(1.5), pval.adjust=0.05, print=N
> length(deGenes)
```

Table 1. Differentially expressed genes between female and male Nigerian individuals found by tweeDEseq.

Symbol	Chr	log2fc	pval.adjust	Description	
RPS4Y1	Y	7.07	3.30E-56	ribosomal protein S4, Y-linked 1	
TMSB4Y	Y	3.56	2.15E-28	thymosin beta 4, Y-linked	
CYorf15A	Y	4.30	2.04E-25	chromosome Y open reading frame 15A	
EIF1AY	Y	3.37	2.59E-21	eukaryotic translation initiation factor 1A, Y-	
				linked	
RPS4Y2	Y	3.03	1.32E-14	ribosomal protein S4, Y-linked 2	
PNPLA4	Х	-1.10	6.19E-11	patatin-like phospholipase domain containing 4	
STS	Х	-0.99	1.15E-04	steroid sulfatase (microsomal), isozyme S	
HDHD1	Х	-0.77	4.35E-04	haloacid dehalogenase-like hydrolase domain	
				containing 1	
UTY	Y	0.63	4.60E-02	ubiquitously transcribed tetratricopeptide repeat	
				gene, Y-linked	

[1] 9

7 Assessing differential expression calling accuracy

Finally, the accuracy of the differential expression analysis illustrated here can be assessed by comparing our list of differentially expressed genes with the list of genes with documented sex-specific expression by means of a Fisher's exact test.

```
> genderGenes <- c(msYgenes[msYgenes %in% rownames(resPT)],</pre>
+
                    XiEgenes [XiEgenes %in% rownames(resPT)])
> N <- nrow(resPT)
> m <- length(genderGenes)</pre>
> n <- length(deGenes)</pre>
> k <- length(intersect(deGenes, genderGenes))</pre>
> t <- array(c(k,n-k,m-k,N+k-n-m), dim=c(2,2), dimnames=list(SEX=c("in","out"),DE=c("
> t
     DE
SEX
      yes no
       9 18
 in
        0 14
  out
> fisher.test(t, alternative="greater")
```



Figure 3. Differential expression analysis for a subset of genes between male and female lymphoblastoid cell lines. On the left a MA-plot shows the magnitude of the fold-change of every gene as function of its average normalized expression level. No expression-level dependent biases can be observed in the data. On the right a volcano plot shows the raw *P* value of every gene for the null hypothesis of no differential expression, calculated by tweeDEseq, as function of its fold-change. In both plots, red circles indicate differentially expressed genes defined by the cutoffs depicted with horizontal and vertical dashed lines. Light blue dots denote genes from the male-specific region (Skaletsky et al., 2003) of chromosome Y (MSY) and dark blue dots denote genes from Xi that escape chromosome inactivation (XiE) in female samples (Carrel and Willard, 2005).

```
Fisher's Exact Test for Count Data

data: t

p-value = 0.01338

alternative hypothesis: true odds ratio is greater than 1

95 percent confidence interval:

1.632421 Inf

sample estimates:

odds ratio

Inf
```

8 Fitting generalized linear models (GLM)

The tweeDEseq package also allows to fit generalized linear models for a response variable following the Poisson-Tweedie family of distributions and several covariates. This can be done using the glmPT() function. For instance, we can fit a model taking the secretin (*SCT*) gene as response and gender as covariate:

```
> mod <- glmPT(countsNigerianNorm["ENSG0000070031",] ~ genderNigerian)</pre>
> mod
Call: glmPT(formula = countsNigerianNorm["ENSG00000070031", ] ~ genderNigerian)
Coefficients:
       (Intercept)
                   genderNigerianmale
           2.2544
                               -0.2412
Poisson-Tweedie parameters:
              С
                                 а
          0.997
                            0.8253
> summary(mod)
Call:
glmPT(formula = countsNigerianNorm["ENSG00000070031", ] ~ genderNigerian)
Coefficients:
                   Estimate Std.Error t value Pr(>|t|)
                              0.1918 11.7553 < 2e-16 ***
(Intercept)
                     2.2544
genderNigerianmale -0.2412
                               0.1622 -1.4874 0.93154
Signif. codes: 0 `***' 0.001 `**' 0.01 `*' 0.05 `.' 0.1 `' 1
Poisson-Tweedie parameters
 Estimate Std.Error
     0.997
             0.0019
С
    0.8253
              0.0427
а
```

The resulting model can also be used to test differential expression. This can be done using the anova () method, which tests whether the model is significantly better than the null one.

> anova (mod)

[1] 0.1435284

The tweeDEglm() allows testing several genes at the same time. This function also allows using multiple processors in the computing process. Following with the example in section 5, we apply it to the same subset of genes and use the gender as covariate:

```
> resPTglm <- tweeDEglm( ~ genderNigerian, counts = countsNigerianNorm[geneSubset,])</pre>
```

tweeDEglm() returns a data.frame with the *AIC* (Akaike Information Criterion) for the fitted and null models as well as the original and adjusted p-values resulting from the test between both models. In order to visualize the top significant genes we run the following command.

> head(resPTglm[sort(resPTglm\$pval.adjust, index.return = TRUE)\$ix,])

AICfullAICnullpvalpval.adjustENSG0000129824553.0737759.28503.373761e-471.383242e-45ENSG0000198692412.7887537.50542.142771e-294.392681e-28ENSG00000154620402.8749518.12612.529103e-273.456440e-26ENSG00000099749481.4012591.22993.895576e-263.992965e-25ENSG00000157828358.1338421.82675.269581e-164.321056e-15ENSG0000006757764.8961801.04176.565947e-104.486730e-09

If we compare these results with those obtained by the tweeDE() function we observe that both methods place the same genes at the top of the most significant list. This is not surprising as, though the statistical tests are not identical, the underlying distributional assumptions are the same. In fact, tweeDEglm() detects all the genes captured by tweeDE().

8.1 Incorporating CQN offsets

Package cqn (Hansen et al. (2012), available at Bioconductor) performs conditional quantile normalization in order to remove possibly existing bias arising from differences in GC content or gene lengths. The method returns a series of offsets which can be incorporated into tweeDEseq via the tweeDEglm or glmPT function.

For instance, suppose the result of the cqn normalization is stored in an object called cqn.subset¹. The normalizing offsets are stored as a matrix at cqn.subset\$offset. They can be incorporated into the model using the 'offset' argument.

```
> tweeDEglm(~ genderNigerian, counts = countsNigerianNorm[geneSubset,],
+ offset = cqn.subset$offset)
```

9 Session info

```
> sessionInfo()
```

```
R version 4.4.1 (2024-06-14)
Platform: x86_64-pc-linux-gnu
Running under: Ubuntu 24.04 LTS
```

Matrix products: default BLAS: /usr/lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/openblas-pthread/libblas.so.3 LAPACK: /usr/lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/openblas-pthread/libopenblasp-r0.3.26.so; LAPACK v

```
locale:
[1] LC_CTYPE=en_US.UTF-8 LC_NUMERIC=C
[3] LC_TIME=en_US.UTF-8 LC_COLLATE=C
[5] LC_MONETARY=en_US.UTF-8 LC_MESSAGES=en_US.UTF-8
[7] LC_PAPER=en_US.UTF-8 LC_NAME=C
[9] LC_ADDRESS=C LC_TELEPHONE=C
[11] LC_MEASUREMENT=en_US.UTF-8 LC_IDENTIFICATION=C
```

¹For more information about how to normalize RNA-seq count data using the Cqn package, please refer to the package vignette available at http://www.bioconductor.org/packages/release/bioc/html/cqn.html

```
time zone: Etc/UTC
tzcode source: system (glibc)
attached base packages:
[1] stats
           graphics grDevices utils
                                    datasets methods
                                                     base
other attached packages:
[1] xtable_1.8-4
                        tweeDEseqCountData_1.43.0
[3] Biobase_2.65.0
                        BiocGenerics_0.51.0
[5] tweeDEseq_1.51.0
loaded via a namespace (and not attached):
statmod_1.5.0 compiler_4.4.1
[9] buildtools_1.0.0 grid_4.4.1
                               Rcpp_1.0.12
[13] sys_3.4.2
             tools_4.4.1
                                              locfit_1.5-9.10
[17] cqn_1.51.0
                  edgeR_4.3.4
                               MASS_7.3-61
```

References

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