

demonstrates that a wide range of biological phenomena can be explained by interactions between TFs and chromatin, and provides a quantitative description of the following processes:

- cooperative binding and synergistic action of non-interacting TFs;
- access of TFs to chromatinized DNA;
- displacement of nucleosomes from regulatory regions;
- rapid evolutionary changes in arrangement and membership of TF-binding sites in eukaryotic regulatory regions.

Strikingly, we found that cooperative binding of TFs to chromatinized DNA is identical to the Monod-Wyman-Changeux model of allosteric cooperativity in hemoglobin, pointing at a general mechanism of cooperativity employed in a range of biological systems. This parallel allowed us to use classical results in biochemistry to gain deep insights into the mechanisms of gene regulation.

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Nucleosome Depleted Region In Promoter Improves Robustness In Gene Expression

Lu Bai, Gilles Charvin, Eric Siggia, Frederick Cross.
Rockefeller University, New York, NY, USA.

Nucleosomes assembled onto promoters are critical for eukaryotic transcription regulation. Recent genome wide mapping of nucleosome positioning in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* revealed that many promoters have nucleosome depleted region (NDR) that contains the transcription factor (TF) binding sites (TFBS), presumably to provide access for the factors. However, the necessity and advantage of this configuration is not well understood. We perturbed the relative position between TFBS and nucleosomes on two G1/S cell-cycle regulated promoters, and used time-lapse fluorescence microscopy to probe their transcriptional activity in individual cells through multiple cell cycles. We find that although localization of TFBSs to NDR is not required for transcription activation, it significantly reduces variability in expression between cell cycles. TFBSs localized to NDR activate transcription in every cell cycle with high reliability. In contrast, when the same TFBSs are located within positioned nucleosomes, activation was bimodal: nearly fully active in some cell cycles, and essentially undetectable in others. Interestingly, this “on/off” transcription pattern displays short-term “memory”, or epigenetic inheritance, from the previous mother cell cycle. Furthermore, the probability of “on/off” cycles could be affected by varying the TF concentration and nucleosome acetylation level. Our results have significant implications for the function and evolution of NDR, and for the relationship between the chromatin structure on promoters and the reliability of gene expression.

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Identifying and quantifying load-dependence in transcription initiation by T7 RNA Polymerase

Bennett S. Kalafut¹, Gary M. Skinner², Koen Visscher¹.

¹University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA, ²Delft Institute of Technology, Delft, Netherlands.

To access the genetic code to be transcribed to RNA, RNA polymerases must first melt the DNA, opening a “transcription bubble”. In single molecule optical tweezers studies of initiation by T7 bacteriophage RNA polymerase (T7 RNAP), we have found that the lifetime of the initiation complex is strongly dependent on tension applied to the upstream DNA, indicating, in accord with structural studies, that initiation by T7 RNAP likely involves mechanical deformation of the DNA. The tension dependence diminishes considerably in the absence of free ribonucleotides, suggesting that this mechanical deformation of the DNA template does not coincide with binding, but instead with the opening of the transcription bubble. A new maximum-likelihood method will be presented, in which data do not have to be grouped into force bins, to identify the force-dependent step or steps in initiation by T7 RNAP and to estimate the associated rates and distances to the transition state from these experiments. This method is generalizable to systems with more complicated kinetic pathways, as long as there are two observable states (e.g. bound and unbound) and an irreversible final transition.

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Single RNA Counting Reveals Alternative Modes Of Gene Expression In Yeast

Daniel Zenklusen, Daniel R. Larson, Jeffery A. Chao, Robert H. Singer.

Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, NY, USA.

Proper execution of gene expression programs requires the coordination of many steps along the gene expression pathway. Preceding all downstream steps, transcriptional control is the most critical step in gene expression regu-

lation. The transcription machinery has to ensure that the two most defining factors of mRNA expression, timing and amplitude of mRNA production, are properly controlled. How precisely the transcription machinery fulfills this task is not known. To address this question directly, we used an improved in situ hybridization approach that detects single mRNA molecules within fixed yeast cells. This approach provides a quantitative measure of mRNA abundance and transcriptional activity for endogenous genes in single cells. We show that expression levels are higher than reported by the literature and vary significantly among cells. Combining the single transcript measurements with stochastic simulations we demonstrate the existence of alternative modes of transcription that lead to different levels of mRNA variation in the cell. Housekeeping genes are expressed by single initiation events but no transcription bursts, resulting in low mRNA variability. In contrast, PDR5, a SAGA regulated gene, is expressed by transcription bursts; multiple transcripts are initiated within a short period of time followed by periods where no transcription occurs, resulting in significantly larger variation. This shows that yeast contains multiple modes of transcription allowing it to modulate its transcriptome according to specific physiological requirements.

To gain even further insight in the kinetic of gene expression, we used a live cell imaging approach that allows us to detect single mRNAs in yeast cells; at the site of transcription as well as in the cytoplasm. Analysis of the expression kinetics of different steps along the gene expression pathway will be presented. Supported by NIH.GM 57071.

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A Powerful Response to Viral Infection

Srividya Iyer Biswas¹, Fernand Hayot², Ciriya Jayaprakash¹, Jianzhong Hu³, James Wetmur³, Stuart Sealton³.

¹Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA, ²MSSM, New York, NY, USA,

³Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA.

The key initial step in the response of the innate immune system to viral infection is the induction of the cytokine Interferon- β (IFN β). Recently, the cell-to-cell variability of IFN β mRNA in human dendritic-cells has been studied. Specifically, the number of mRNAs produced by each of the two alleles in a cell in response to infection to by a non-pathogenic avian-flu virus was measured and surprisingly high levels of variability were observed. The induction is known to occur through the slow recruitment of several transcription factors to form an ‘enhanceosome’ assembly, over a period of hours. This variability referred to as noise was attributed to the dynamics of enhanceosome formation. Noise can arise because of the stochasticity of the chemical reactions due to the small copy numbers of molecules involved (termed “intrinsic”) or due to fluctuations the number of transcription factors between cells (termed “extrinsic”). The experiment was able to determine the allelic origin of the mRNAs in a given cell and quantify the ‘extrinsic noise’ as the correlation between the number of alleles produced by each allele, thus isolating the intrinsic noise contribution. They found that a significant fraction (about half) of the total noise came from intrinsic noise.

We have analyzed the measured mRNA distribution and find that the observed long-tailed distribution can be fit by a power-law over roughly three decades at different times of observation. We find that a pulsing model in which the completed enhanceosome switches between a state in which transcription occurs at a very low or zero level and another in which transcription proceeds at a high rate can reproduce the power-law behavior. We discuss under what conditions this model produces mRNA distributions with the observed long-tailed behavior and how these distributions evolve with time.

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How Xenopus Embryos Complete DNA Replication Reliably: Solution to the Random-completion Problem

Scott Cheng-Hsin Yang, John Bechhoefer.

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada.

DNA replication in *Xenopus* embryos starts at random positions along the genome and at random times during S phase. This spatiotemporal randomness implies fluctuations in the completion times and can lead to cell death if replication takes longer than the cell cycle time (approximately 25 min). Surprisingly, while the typical completion time (approximately 20 min) is close to the cell cycle time, replication failure occurs only about 1 in 300 times. These observations raise an interesting question, known as the “random-completion problem”: How can *Xenopus* embryos accurately control the replication timing despite the spatiotemporal randomness?

We use a nucleation-and-growth model and extreme-value statistics to address quantitatively the random-completion problem. We first show that *Xenopus* embryos solve the problem by using a large reservoir of potential replication origins that are increasingly likely to initiate, a situation that leads to robust