Towards Stronger Adversarial Baselines Through Human-AI Collaboration

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Abstract

Natural language processing (NLP) systems are often used for adversarial tasks such as detecting spam, abuse, hate speech, and fake news. Properly evaluating such systems requires dynamic evaluation that searches for weaknesses in the model, rather than a static test set. Prior work has evaluated such models on both manually and automatically generated examples, but both approaches have limitations: manually constructed examples are time-consuming to create and are limited by the imagination and intuition of the creators, while automatically constructed examples are often ungrammatical or labeled inconsistently. We propose to combine human and AI expertise in generating adversarial examples, benefiting from humans’ expertise in language and automated attacks’ ability to probe the target system more quickly and thoroughly. We present a system that facilitates attack construction, combining human judgment with automated attacks to create better attacks more efficiently. Preliminary results from our own experimentation suggest that human-AI hybrid attacks are more effective than either human-only or AI-only attacks. A complete user study to validate these hypotheses is still pending.

1 Introduction

Humans have used language to deceive each other for millennia. With the advent of NLP systems, humans now work to deceive models and algorithms, from evading email spam filters in the early 2000s to defeating classifiers for social network spam, abusive language, misinformation, and more. More recently, humans have developed automated adversarial attacks that minimally modify text while changing the output of a classifier or other NLP systems (Ebrahimi et al., 2018). These automated attacks have the potential to be much more efficient than humans, helping attackers to find weaknesses in models and helping defenders find and patch those same weaknesses (Xie et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2019).

The number of automated attacks continues to grow but their effectiveness remains low — Wang et al. (2021a) found that 90% of automated adversarial attacks changed the semantics of the original input or confused human annotators. We have observed similar behavior, as shown in Table 1. These examples are generated by word-level attack algorithms PSO (Zang et al., 2020), BAE (Garg and Ramakrishnan, 2020), and PWWS (Ren et al., 2019), as implemented in the TextAttack framework (Morris et al., 2020), on the sentiment dataset SST-2 (Socher et al., 2013) against BERT model (Devlin et al., 2019). Although all perturbations change the predicted label, PSO chooses a synonym that is inappropriate in the context, BAE selects a complete antonym, and PWWS picks some rare substitutes that are nonsensical and possibly offensive.

Doubtless, humans can be more effective than these attacks, given their effectiveness against real-world spam and abuse filters. We believe that the next step for adversarial attacks and robust NLP is human-AI collaboration, in which humans work with automated adversarial algorithms to pro-
duce effective attacks efficiently. Furthermore, real-world attackers are already doing this. Spammers already use many different technologies to accomplish their tasks, including text spinners to rewrite text, HTML tricks to conceal suspicious text, botnets to scale up and avoid IP bans, and more. A typical spammer does not craft every message individually, but uses semi-automated techniques to generate many different messages\(^1\). In response, a growing amount of NLP research is now using human expertise through human-in-the-loop (HITL) methods to create new benchmarking datasets for evaluating and improving the robustness of NLP systems to adversarial inputs.

Thus far, human expertise in adversarial NLP tasks has been limited. There is a growing body of work in which humans are asked to craft inputs where a given model will perform poorly, but they receive little support in doing so — sometimes word saliences (Mozes et al., 2021), sometimes model predictions (Kiela et al., 2021), and sometimes even less. Overall, the effort between humans and machines is still largely separate; that is, humans generate adversarial examples alone based on model interpretations, without directly interacting with any attack algorithms.

In this paper, we study the potential of direct human-AI interaction for generating higher-quality adversarial examples for NLP tasks. We work with the state-of-the-art word-level attacks on benchmark datasets for sentiment analysis and abuse detection. We choose word-level attacks as they can be more subtle than character-level attacks, which have obvious misspellings. We design an interactive user interface that enables four types of attack methods, including two human-AI collaboration methods. Instead of a pure black-box environment, our interface explains the algorithm’s search space and allows humans to modify and improve the perturbations while giving humans immediate feedback from the target NLP model. Along with generated attacks, we collect data for user experience and user preference with regard to different attack approaches. We then further study the collected data and analyze the impact of proposed human-AI collaboration methods and the degree of improvement on the adversarial examples. At present, we have pilot data from using the system ourselves; a full user study is pending IRB approval.

We summarize our contributions as follows:

- We propose a novel human-AI collaboration strategy to enable direct human and AI interaction for generating word-level adversarial examples for NLP tasks effectively and efficiently.
- We design a framework with friendly user interface to realize four types of attack methods on benchmark datasets against state-of-the-art NLP models. In addition to helping generate adversarial examples, the framework also collects self- and peer-evaluation of example quality and user feedback about the interface.
- We share initial results based on our own use of the system, while IRB approval for a full study is pending.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses work related to our research. Section 3 introduces our framework, the human-AI collaboration methods and the evaluation metrics. Section 4 gives preliminary results and some brief analysis for our findings. Section 5 explains the stages of experiments for generating and collecting quality data. Finally, we conclude and discuss future work in Section 6.

2 Related Work

We review prior work on automated adversarial attacks for NLP, and HITL in adversarial learning.

Automated adversarial attacks for NLP: With the growth of research that studies adversarial learning in NLP, a variety of attack methods have been developed on multiple levels. From character-level modifications such as HotFlip (Ebrahimi et al., 2018), DeepWordBug (Gao et al., 2018), and VIPER (Eger et al., 2019), to word-level perturbations such as BAE (Garg and Ramakrishnan, 2020), PSO (Zang et al., 2020), PWWS (Ren et al., 2019), and TextFooler (Jin et al., 2020). Many of them have been aggregated and organized by toolchains like TextAttack (Morris et al., 2020) and OpenAttack (Zeng et al., 2021) for easy access to researchers.

For character-level attacks, although they show their effectiveness in many ways, they mainly fall in the following two categories: Some of the character-level modifications can be seen as typos if an algorithm simply influences the embedding space by replacing/inserting/deleting one or a few words.

\(^1\)For an example of a spammer script that does this, see https://alexking.org/blog/2013/12/22/spam-comment-generator-script.
characters in a word, such as DeepWordBug (Gao et al., 2018), then they may be easily detected by a grammar checker tool, like Grammarly; the others can introduce some unique encoding/decoding methods and transform letters to another form, such as VIPER (Eger et al., 2019) that adds accent signs on top of each letter, and these modification may be easily identified by human. Overall, character-level perturbations tend to be more obvious.

On the other hand, the study of word-level attacks is more popular, as a substitute for a word may significantly impact the semantics of the text. Many attack methodologies have been investigated for searching for the optimal synonym substitutions, including BERT-based contextual prediction (Garg and Ramakrishnan, 2020; Li et al., 2020), gradient-based word swap (Ebrahimi et al., 2018; Wallace et al., 2019), particle swarm optimization (Zang et al., 2020), and greedy word search with saliency scores (Ren et al., 2019).

We summarize three attacks that are included in our framework. **BAE:** BERT-based Adversarial Examples (BAE), a black-box contextual perturbation algorithm based on a BERT masked language model (MLM). BAE masks some part of the text, then replaces and inserts tokens into the text, using the BERT-MLM to generate adversarial examples. **PWWS:** Probability Weighted Word Saliency (PWWS), a black-box greedy algorithm that ranks the importance of words based on the saliency score and calculates the classification probability that are used to determine the synonym substitution. **TextFooler:** TextFooler, a black-box greedy algorithm identifies the important words and replaces them with the words that are most semantically similar and grammatically correct with a higher priority until the prediction is altered.

These automated word-level attacks mostly rely on the knowledge of existing target models and algorithms’ intensive search to locate the best synonym substitutions. However, recent work (Xie et al., 2021, 2022) shows that the quality of generated adversarial examples is actually far from satisfactory, with respect to the low attack success rate across domains, incorrect grammar, and distorted meaning.

**HITL in adversarial learning:** As the capacity of automated algorithms may be limited, many researchers propose incorporating crowd-sourcing into generating and annotating adversarial examples. The Dynabench framework asks humans to manually construct examples where an NLP system would perform poorly (Kiela et al., 2021). A HITL QA system that asks humans to write adversarial questions that break a QA system while remaining answerable by humans (Wallace and Boyd-Graber, 2018). The Adversarial NLI project asks humans to annotate mislabeled data and uses humans as adversaries to create a benchmark natural language inference (NLI) dataset for a more robust NLP model (Nie et al., 2020). The most related work compares the performance of human- and machine-generated word-level adversarial examples for NLP classification tasks (Mozes et al., 2021).

However, existing work falls short of direct collaboration between humans and AI. The advantages of human crowd-sourcing and that of automated algorithms are still quite distinct.

### 3 Framework

In our framework, we study the potential of direct human-AI collaboration for generating higher-quality adversarial examples. At the time of submission, we have completed the design of the framework, confirmed the details for human-AI collaboration, and implemented the interactive user interface.

#### 3.1 Components & Workflow

Our task is divided into two parts: generating adversarial examples and evaluating adversarial examples. Figure 1 depicts the workflow. First we feed the input samples to the attack phase where four attack methods are implemented. Human participants then use these attack methods to generate adversarial examples aiming to fool the target model’s predictions. Participants are asked to self-evaluate the quality of generated adversarial examples based on grammatical properties, the difficulty of generating those examples, and their experiences with the system in terms of the helpfulness of different HITL strategies. Peer-evaluation is also included for evaluating the grammatical properties, and identifying the source of any given text.

We implement three word-level attacks — BAE, PWWS, and TextFooler from the TextAttack library on sentiment dataset SST-2 and abuse comment dataset Hatebase (Davidson et al., 2017) against the RoBERTa target models (Liu et al., 2019) that are trained on these datasets separately. We use RoBERTa as the target model because it outper-

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2Grammarly. https://www.grammarly.com/.
Figure 1: System & Workflow. Human figures in attack phase indicate that there is direct human-AI interaction. Human figures in evaluation phase indicate that humans are involved in both self-evaluation and peer-evaluation.

Table 2: A Summary of automated attack algorithms. TF is short for TextFooler.

| Attack  | Transformation                                      | Operation            |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| BAE     | BERT Masked Token Prediction                        | Replace & Insert     |
| PWWS    | WordNet-based synonym swap                          | Replace               |
| TF      | Counter-fitted word embedding swap                   | Replace               |

forms BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and XLNet (Yang et al., 2019) on various datasets across domains for classification in recent work (Xie et al., 2022). We summarize the characters of these attacks in Table 2. Please refer to Section 2 for a detailed description of them. All attacks share the same Greedy-WIR search method implemented in TextAttack. We make certain modifications to the scripts in the TextAttack library to generate desired intermediate attack results, which are used as interpretable information for HITL adversarial attacks.

3.2 Generating Adversarial Examples

For attack generation, we design an interactive user interface introducing four attack methods:

- **Auto**: Black-box. Participants simply read and evaluate adversarial examples generated by one of the automated attack algorithms. Participants are not provided with any insight on how an automated attack algorithm modifies a sample, but the perturbed example itself. This method is considered as the baseline.

- **Manual**: Black-box. Participants rely on their judgment solely to attack a given sample. The only information they receive is the immediate target model prediction. Once an adversarial example is entered, the target model returns the prediction result to show whether or not the crafted example has successfully flipped the predictive label.

- **Select**: Gray-box. Participants are given intermediate perturbation results from the automated algorithm — specifically, keywords and potential substitution candidates for each keyword. Participants can select the best word substitute using dropdown lists, or enter an alternative word in a text input box. See Figure 5 for the interface. Basically, the Select method relaxes the constraints from the automated algorithm, and allows humans to modify up to five keywords. The immediate predictive label and probability of the selected word combination from the target model is also provided to show whether the chosen words have successfully changed the prediction.

- **Saliency**: Gray-box. Participants are shown a dynamic saliency map as they craft their adversarial examples. A saliency map shows what words the target model identifies as most important that are most likely to affect the prediction, and then marks those words with colors with different intensities. Unlike (Mozes et al., 2021), where the interface displays word saliencies calculated by replacing the word with an out-of-vocabulary token, we implement the built-in method in each automated attack to calculate the saliency score. For example, BAE and TextFooler simply delete the word and calculate the word saliencies, while PWWS replaces each word with an unknown token and calculates the weighted saliency. The corresponding mathematical expressions are provided in A.2 of the Appendix. Overall, the Saliency method grants even more flexibility by allowing humans to change more words if necessary in order to preserve correct grammar and semantics. Participants can adjust their perturbation based on the dynamic saliency map and the target model’s immediate prediction, see Figure 6 for the interface.

For each method, participants are given a small number of original samples selected from one of the datasets, perform adversarial attacks on those samples with or without the assistance of the automated algorithms.
3.3 Evaluating Adversarial Examples

To evaluate generated adversarial examples, we consider the following properties:

- **Grammar**: measures whether or not the text contains any syntax errors, and retains the original or similar semantics. This is crucial for identifying if an adversarial attack is successful, as if the perturbation is fundamentally wrong by making the sentence unreadable or flipping the emotion of the message completely, we consider it as a failed attack.

- **Plausibility**: measures whether or not the text is naturally crafted by native speakers. A piece of text is highly plausible if it is natural, logically correct, appropriately worded, and preserving meaningful messages (Wang et al., 2021b). These properties appear as naturalness, correctness, appropriateness and meaningfulness in our user interface.

- **Effort**: reflects the difficulty level for participants to successfully perform adversarial attacks using different attack methods.

- **Helpfulness**: collects the degree of helpfulness of the information provided to participants to assist with generating adversarial examples in different attack methods (i.e., intermediate search results, lists of candidates, saliency maps, and more).

All properties are evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5 where 5 indicates the best quality, the most difficult, or the most helpful, depending on the specific property; see Figure 7.

Participants are required to self-evaluate their own constructed examples using each of the attack methods. Since self-evaluation can be very subjective, to ensure the fairness and to yield a more balanced and less biased analysis and outcome, we also plan to include anonymous peer-evaluation using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) with a group of AMT workers who are excluded from previous attack tasks. Each AMT worker reads a random subset of the adversarial examples, identifies what source an example may come from, and evaluates the grammatical quality (i.e. grammar and plausibility) of that example on the same scales.

4 Preliminary Results

Our hypotheses are that with minimal human collaboration, compared to automated attacks alone, the attacks would yield more promising results that are meaningful while holding correct grammar and semantics. In our preliminary work, we already see promise for this direction. Table 3 shows an example where PWWS on its own failed to come up with a good attack example, but succeeded in identifying the key text to modify. A human was then able to propose alternative text, which tricked the classifier while maintaining the correct semantics.

| OR. Txt | Auto Txt | HITL. Txt |
|---------|----------|-----------|
| 4 friends, 2 couples, 2000 miles, and all the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer they can drink - it’s the ultimate road-trip. (Pos. 62%) | 4 friends, 2 couples, 2000 miles, and all the Pabst disconsolate Ribbon beer they can drink - it’s the ultimate road-trip. (Neg. 84%) | 4 friends, 2 couples, 2000 miles, and all the Pabst cheap beer they can drink - it’s the ultimate road-trip. (Neg. 83%) |

Table 3: Original vs. automated attack vs. HITL attack

As a pilot experiment, to test the viability of the framework before recruiting participants, the authors used the framework on themselves to collect 532 unique adversarial examples generated from the SST-2 dataset. By studying these examples, we have seen the following patterns (which we hypothesize will extend to the full experiments):

**Success Rate**: Figure 2 shows the attack success rate across all attack methods. Though an automated attack may have a higher attack success rate due to the advantage of intensive search and the NLP model-oriented design, humans can achieve comparable attack success rate if provided with better human-AI interaction. Additionally, manually crafted attacks without any assist cannot compete with those generated through other methods.

**Grammar and Plausibility**: Figure 3 presents the average scores for grammar and plausibility, where the error bars denote the standard errors of the scores. The scores are aggregated and averaged per the attack method from the self-evaluation results over the 532 adversarial examples. It is obvious that human-generated adversarial examples on average have higher scores considering the grammatical properties and plausibility. Manual attack and HITL methods seem to produce higher-quality adversarial examples with the assistance of automated algorithms, as compared to automated algorithms.
attacks, these methods loosen the constraints on various degrees and grant humans more freedom to make more modifications if needed. Therefore humans have more flexibility crafting grammatically correct and plausible adversarial examples.

**Queries and Human Effort:** The top of Figure 4 displays the number of queries it takes for an automated algorithm or a human to choose their word substitutions. The bottom of the figure gives the average effort scores for each attack method. The error bars denote the standard errors of the scores. The results illustrate that humans are able to perturb an NLP model with more effort but fewer queries, and the gray-box setting, which includes additional information for the participants, is easier to attack than the black-box setting. The extra information provides some insight and explanation about how an automate algorithm understands the NLP model and how an NLP model decides the predictions.

5 Planned Experiments

We plan to hire approximately 54 adult native English speakers, of whom we expect a subset to be experts in NLP or linguistics, from our local university to generate adversarial examples, and additional adult native English speaker AMT workers for peer-evaluation.

Unlike the recent work of Mozes et al. (2021), which relies entirely on online crowd-sourcing on AMT, we carry on in-person experiments for attack generation, where we provide a few examples and detailed instructions to the participants to show how our interface operates, and what the standards/baselines are for evaluating the adversarial examples. We expect to obtain higher-quality data by bringing participants into a more controlled environment where it’s easier to provide instruction, answer questions, and receive feedback.

To motivate participants through the process, we have designed an incentive payment plan. Details are included in A.3 of the Appendix.

**Stage 1: adversarial example generation and self-evaluation.** In each task, each participant is asked to work with approximately 15 examples from a source dataset, generating adversarial examples based on the source examples. We show the same examples to three different participants, who work independently to find their own adversarial examples. This gives us a chance to observe how varied the solutions are; if solutions vary substantially, then a larger group of people may have a better chance to find a good attack.

To increase the quality of the adversarial examples, we plan to have each participant complete the Auto and Manual methods before moving on to our proposed HITL methods. This also serves the purpose of training participants in these tasks, similar to tasks 1-3 by Mozes et al. (2021). By doing so, participants have the chance to get familiar with our user interface, and get a better understanding of the capacity of an automated attack algorithm versus a human, in terms of influencing the target model’s predictions. They then closely interact with the automated algorithms and the target model, where they obtain extra interpretable information from both parties that could assist them with more effective perturbations.

To increase the independence of the factors that may potentially impact the experiment results statistically, such as the order of samples and attack tasks being presented to an participant, we mix up the order of samples in each attack method, and we switch the order of attack methods before giving them to the participants.

Each participant at our local university is expected to submit about 45 adversarial examples if they successfully complete all four tasks (the examples are not necessarily all successful attacks). We also collect all the attempts they make between two submissions and consider the total number of attempts as the number of queries. We are hoping to
gather at least 2000 unique and quality adversarial examples among participants from all tasks.

Stage 2: peer-evaluation  After collecting and organising generated adversarial examples, we will recruit an independent group of AMT workers to annotate the data. Similar to (Mozes et al., 2021), we plan to select AMT workers based on their historical performance. That is, AMT workers who have successfully completed more than 1000 human intelligence tasks, and have an approval rate that is higher than 98% would be selected for peer-evaluation. We present AMT workers with a few adversarial examples (approximately 50 examples) generated by humans and/or automated algorithms, randomly and anonymously. Each example is evaluated by three AMT workers to reduce variance.

We aim to recruit 30 qualified AMT workers and hope to gather 1500 unique peer-evaluation results from them for about 500 examples.

6 Conclusion & Future Work

Humans have excellent intuition about language, but weak intuition about deep networks; automated attacks are often the opposite. Given the weak performance of manual attacks and automated attacks against NLP systems, some type of human-AI collaboration is essential to truly evaluate their robustness, and to be prepared for the inevitable attacks from real-world adversaries.

In the future, we will carry out the experiments as designed, and further include the IMDB movie review dataset curated by (Maas et al., 2011). As the texts in the IMDB dataset are often longer, this dataset may provide participants greater flexibility in modifying the examples.

We believe that further study into collaboration methods will lead to a better understanding of adversarial attacks and more robust NLP models. We hope to provide a new benchmark for HITL adversarial learning while we continue exploring other effective human-AI collaboration methods. We hope that our framework will help researchers and practitioners better evaluate the robustness of NLP models to the best attacks that humans and algorithms can construct, and then improve their models by training on these adversarial examples.

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Zhouhang Xie, Jonathan Brophy, Adam Noack, Wencong You, Kalyani Asthana, Carter Perkins, Sabrina Reis, Sameer Singh, and Daniel Lowd. 2022. Identifying adversarial attacks on text classifiers.
We now describe the word salience methods. The importance score after deleting word $w_i$ is calculated as the difference between the predictive scores before and after removing $w_i$, i.e.,

$$I_{w_i} = P(X) - P(X_{\setminus w_i}),$$

if $P(X) = P(X_{\setminus w_i}) = y$,

$$I_{w_i} = (P(y|X) - P(y|X_{\setminus w_i})) + (P(\hat{y}|X_{\setminus w_i}) - P(\hat{y}|X)),$$

if $P(X) = y$ and $P(X_{\setminus w_i}) = \hat{y}$, where $y \neq \hat{y}$.

PWWS first replaces a word $w_i$ with a candidate word $w_i^*$ to form a new sentence $X^* = \{w_1, \ldots, w_i^*, \ldots, w_n\}$, where $w_i^*$ is the best candidate that changes the predictive probability the most, calculated by

$$w_i^* = \arg \max_{w' \in C} P(y|X) - P(y|X').$$

where $X' = \{w_1, \ldots, w'_i, \ldots, w_n\}$, and $w'_i$ is a candidate token among all substitute candidates $C$ for word $w_i$. Therefore, the most significant predictive probability change is obtained by

$$\Delta P^*_i = P(y|X) - P(y|X^*).$$

PWWS then calculates the standard saliency by replacing $w_i$ with an unknown token via

$$S(X, w_i) = P(y|X) - P(y|\hat{X})$$

where $\hat{X} = \{w_1, \ldots, \text{unknown}, \ldots, w_n\}$. A saliency vector $S(X)$ is obtained by calculating the saliency for every word in the sentence. PWWS finally combines the predictive probability and the saliency vector through a dot product to get a probability weighted saliency score (Ren et al., 2019). That is

$$H(X, X^*, w_i) = \phi S(X) \cdot \Delta P_i^*,$$

where $\phi$ is a softmax function. $H(X, X^*, w_i)$ eventually determines the word importance for PWWS.

A.3 Incentive Payment Plan

Each participant at the university is expected to complete the adversarial example generation tasks using all four attack methods for consistency. Therefore, we create an incentive payment plan to motivate participants to work through the four tasks: Auto, Manual, Select, and Saliency. The Auto setting is fairly simple, which we expect participants to finish the task in less than 30 minutes, and we pay $12/person. The Manual setting is slightly more time-consuming and more difficult,
we expect them to finish the task in 60 minutes, and we pay $28/person. The Select and Saliency may also require some effort and attempts so that we expect them to complete the tasks in 90 minutes, and we pay $40/person for each task. By doing so, we hope to keep participants interested and motivated throughout the whole process.

We also plan to reward ten participants $10 who give constructive feedback for our user interface or experiment design through a drawing system. Additionally, we will double the pay for the top three participants who provide the most quality adversarial examples, where the quality is evaluated anonymously on AMT during the peer-evaluation phase.

For peer-evaluation performed on AMT, we will match the market prices and pay $0.2~0.25/example to the AMT workers. Peer-evaluation is fairly straightforward, and we estimate that it takes no more than 90 minutes for each AMT worker to complete the task.
Figure 6: The interface for the Saliency task

Figure 7: The interface for self-evaluation