Thiol-linked alkylation of RNA to assess expression dynamics

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Gene expression profiling by high-throughput sequencing reveals qualitative and quantitative changes in RNA species at steady state but obscures the intracellular dynamics of RNA transcription, processing and decay. We developed thiol(SH)-linked alkylation for the metabolic sequencing of RNA (SLAM seq), an orthogonal-chemistry-based RNA sequencing technology that detects 4-thiouridine (s⁴U) incorporation in RNA species at single-nucleotide resolution. In combination with well-established metabolic RNA labeling protocols and coupled to standard, low-input, high-throughput RNA sequencing methods, SLAM seq enabled rapid access to RNA-polymerase-II-dependent gene expression dynamics in the context of total RNA. We validated the method in mouse embryonic stem cells by showing that the RNA-polymerase-II-dependent transcriptional output scaled with Oct4/Sox2/Nanog-defined enhancer activity, and we provide quantitative and mechanistic evidence for transcript-specific RNA turnover mediated by post-transcriptional gene regulatory pathways initiated by microRNAs and N⁶-methyladenosine. SLAM seq facilitates the dissection of fundamental mechanisms that control gene expression in an accessible, cost-effective and scalable manner.

The regulated expression of genetic information is required for cellular homeostasis and environmental adaptability and its transposition can cause human diseases. Underlying these fundamental biological processes are tightly regulated molecular events that control the relative kinetics of RNA transcription, processing and degradation. Understanding the molecular basis for gene regulation demands insight into the relative kinetics of RNA biogenesis and degradation in a transcript-specific and systematic manner. Metabolic RNA labeling approaches that employ nucleotide-analogs enable tracking of RNA species over time without interfering with cellular integrity. Among these, 4-thiouridine (s⁴U) represents the most widely used nucleotide analog to study the dynamics of RNA expression because it is readily imported into metazoan cells by equilibrate nucleoside transporters and provides unique physicochemical properties for thiol-specific reactivity and affinity, which enables biochemical separation by reversible biotinylation. Affinity-based RNA-purification following s⁴U labeling has been successfully applied to cultured cells of diverse biological and organismal origin, as well as in vivo in yeast and metazoan model organisms, including insects and mammals, using either s⁴U or 4-thiouracil following metabolic activation by uracil phosphoribosyltransferase (UPRT). However, as with any biochemical separation method, the underlying protocols are laborious, require ample starting material and typically encounter the problem of low signal-to-noise performance, in part because of limited biotinylation efficiency. Furthermore, analysis of labeled RNA species by sequencing requires extensive controls to provide integrative insights into gene expression dynamics and fails to report global effects unless spike-in strategies are applied. Alternative concepts for the direct identification of nucleotide analogs by sequencing have emerged from recent epitranscriptomics technologies, but current methods are incompatible with biologically inert nucleotide analogs (such as, s⁴U) and fail to report absolute stoichiometry.

Here, we report thiol(SH)-linked alkylation for the metabolic sequencing of RNA (SLAM seq), an orthogonal chemistry approach that uncovers s⁴U at single-nucleotide resolution by reverse-transcription-dependent thymine-to-cytosine (T > C) conversions in a high-throughput sequencing-compatible manner.

RESULTS
Detection of s⁴U by sequencing
In SLAM seq, we employed the primary thiol-reactive compound iodoacetamide (IAA), which covalently attaches a carboxyamidoethyl group to s⁴U by nucleophilic substitution. Quantitative s⁴U alkylation was confirmed by a shift in the characteristic absorbance spectrum of 4-thiouracil from ~335 to ~297 nm. Under optimal reaction conditions, absorbance at 335 nm decreased 50-fold compared with untreated 4-thiouracil, resulting in complete (298%) alkylation in 15 min.
of thiol-specific alkylation in a ribose context confirmed these derivatization efficiencies (Fig. 1c and Supplementary Fig. 2). Because quantitative identification of s^4U by sequencing presumes that reverse transcriptase (RT) passes alkylated s^4U residues without drop-off, we determined the effect of s^4U alkylation on RT processivity in primer extension assays (Supplementary Fig. 3a). We did not observe a significant effect of s^4U alkylation on RT processivity when compared with a non-s^4U-containing oligo with identical sequence (P > 0.05; Supplementary Fig. 3b,c). To evaluate the effect of s^4U alkylation on RT-directed nucleotide incorporation, we isolated the full-length products of primer extension reactions, PCR amplified the cDNA and subjected the libraries to high-throughput sequencing (Fig. 1d and Supplementary Fig. 4). Although the presence of s^4U prompted a constant 10–11% T > C conversions already in the absence of alkylation (presumably as a result of base-pairing variations of s^4U tautomeres), s^4U alkylation increased T > C conversions by 8.5-fold, resulting in a >0.94 conversion rate (Fig. 1d). Notably, iodoacetamide-treatment leaves conversion rates of any given non-thiol-containing nucleotide unaltered (Supplementary Fig. 4c).

**Measuring the polyadenylated transcriptional output in mESCs**

Next, we subjected mESCs to 45 min of s^4U pulse labeling (final concentration of 100 µM s^4U), followed by total RNA extraction, alkylation and mRNA 3’-end library preparation (Supplementary Fig. 10a). To identify newly made transcripts, we extracted background-error-subtracted T > C conversion-containing reads for individual transcripts (Supplementary Table 1). Indeed, initial inspection of selected transcripts with comparable steady-state abundance (~100 cpm) revealed transcript-specific differences in the number of recovered T > C reads (Fig. 3a). Although high levels of T > C reads were recovered for the ESC-specific transcription factor Sox2 and the inherently instable primary microRNA transcript from the miR-290-295 cluster, the house-keeping transcript Gapdh was associated with fewer T > C reads, presumably because its accumulation to high steady-state expression levels was achieved by high transcript stability (Fig. 3a).

Transcriptional output by RNA polymerase II is regulated by transcription factors that bind cis-acting regulatory elements known as enhancers. In ESCs, the pluripotent state is largely governed by a small number of enhancer-associated master transcription factors, including Oct4, Sox2 and Nanog, which drive the expression of the target genes necessary to maintain the ESC state (Supplementary Fig. 10b). Transcriptional output measurements by SLAM seq revealed that well-established Oct4, Sox2 and Nanog (OSN) target genes produced overall a larger number of T > C conversion-containing reads in value of s^4U in mESCs (Fig. 2a and Supplementary Fig. 5).

After metabolic RNA labeling for 24 h, we prepared total RNA followed by thiol-alkylation and 3’-end mRNA sequencing (Quant-seq). Quant-seq provides rapid and quantitative access to mRNA expression profiles by generating Illumina-compatible libraries of the sequences close to the 3’ end of polyadenylated RNA (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 6) (Moll, P., Ante, M., Seitz, A. & Reda, T., unpublished data). Hence, only one fragment per transcript is generated, which corresponds to polyadenylated mRNA 3’-end tags, rendering normalization of reads to gene length obsolete (Supplementary Fig. 6). Furthermore, 3’-end sequencing enables the cell-type-specific re-evaluation of untranslated region (UTR) annotations to conduct mRNA 3’ isoform-specific expression analysis (Supplementary Fig. 7). Following generating SLAM seq libraries through the Quant-seq protocol from mESCs 24 h after s^4U metabolic labeling, we observed a strong accumulation of T > C conversions when compared with unlabeled conditions (Fig. 2b). Transcriptome-wide analyses confirmed this observation (Fig. 2c).

In the absence of s^4U metabolic labeling, we observed a median rate of ≤0.1% for any given conversion, consistent with Illumina-reported sequencing error, whereas s^4U-labeling resulted in a statistically significant (P < 10^{-4}, Mann–Whitney test), 50-fold increase in T > C conversion rates (Fig. 2c), which distributed evenly across the covered genomic regions (Fig. 2d, and Supplementary Fig. 8). Notably, non-T > C conversions remained below the expected sequencing error rates (Fig. 2c), and treatment of total RNA with iodoacetamide in the absence of metabolic labeling did not affect quantitative gene expression analysis (Supplementary Fig. 8d). s^4U incorporation measured by mass spectrometry in polyadenylated-enriched RNA was comparable with SLAM seq data (Supplementary Fig. 9).
the s^4U-pulse experiment (Fig. 3b, Supplementary Fig. 10b and Supplementary Table 1). When inspected globally, transcripts derived from the 2,029 expressed genes (>5 cpm steady state) with proximal OSN occupancy produced significantly more T > C reads when compared with 4,994 genes without proximal OSN enhancer (Mann–Whitney test, P < 10^{-4}; Fig. 3c)\(^8\). A subset of enhancers in mESCs were previously described to form arrays of regulatory elements (aka super or strong enhancer, SE) with unusually strong accumulations of transcriptional coactivators\(^8\)\(^,\)\(^19\). In fact, the 156 genes next to strong enhancers exhibited the highest transcriptional output (Mann–Whitney test, P < 10^{-4}; Fig. 3c). In contrast, only genes proximal to strong enhancers were associated with above-average steady-state expression (Supplementary Fig. 10c). We concluded that SLAM seq provides a quantitative readout for enhancer activity in mESCs.

Given these findings, together with the fact that transcriptional output significantly correlated with data derived from global nuclear run-on experiments (\(r = 0.41, P < 10^{-15}\); Supplementary Fig. 10d)\(^20\), we conclude that SLAM seq uncouples transcriptional output from stability effects to globally measure RNA-polymerase-II-derived transcriptional activity.

**Global and transcript-specific mRNA stability in mESCs**

To directly measure mRNA transcript stabilities, we subjected mESCs to s^4U metabolic RNA labeling (100 μM s^4U) for 24 h, followed by washout and chase using non-thiol-containing uridine, and prepared total RNA at various time points along the chase. Total RNA was then subjected to alkylation and Quant-seq (Supplementary Fig. 11a). Inspection of candidate genes revealed constant steady-state expression across the time course, whereas the number of T > C conversion-containing reads decreased over time in a transcript-specific manner (T > C reads; Supplementary Fig. 11b, c). After calculating the background-subtracted, U-content- and coverage-normalized T > C conversion rate for each transcript at every time point relative to 0 h chase, normalized T > C conversion rates fit well to single-exponential decay kinetics, enabling the determination of transcript half-life (Fig. 4a). As expected, RNA stabilities differed by more than one order of magnitude among individual transcripts (Fig. 4a). By fitting the data of 8,405 transcripts (steady-state expression >5 cpm) to single-exponential decay kinetics, we determined a median mRNA half-life of 3.9 h, corresponding to a cell-cycle-normalized half-life of 4.3 h (Fig. 4b and Supplementary Table 2). These measurements fall in the range of previously determined mRNA stabilities in mammalian cells\(^21\).

Previous studies proposed a close relationship between transcript-specific mRNA half-life and its physiological function\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^10\). We therefore ranked the 6,665 transcripts for which half-life was determined at high accuracy (\(r^2 > 0.6\)) according to their relative stability and performed gene ontology enrichment analysis.
for the 666 most or least stable mRNAs (Fig. 4c). Transcripts with short half-life significantly enriched for regulators of RNA-polymerase-II-dependent transcription (P < 10^-3), whereas stable mRNAs associated with the gene ontology (GO) terms translation (P < 10^-14), respiratory electron transport (P < 10^-9) and oxidative phosphorylation (P < 10^-12). Together with gene set enrichment analyses (Supplementary Fig. 11d), SLAM seq measurements confirmed that transcripts encoding proteins with housekeeping functions tend to decay at low rates, perhaps reflecting evolutionary adaptation to energy constraints. In contrast, transcripts with a regulatory role tend to decay faster, most certainly because control over the persistence of genetic information facilitates adaptation to environmental changes.

We also examined global relationships between transcriptional output, mRNA stability and steady-state gene expression in mESCs as determined by SLAM seq pulse and pulse and chase experiments (Supplementary Fig. 12). Transcript biogenesis rates and mRNA half-life both positively correlated with steady-state gene expression with correlation coefficients of 0.57 and 0.43, respectively. In contrast, the rates of mRNA biogenesis did not positively correlate with mRNA half-life (r = -0.07), but they showed high correlation with mRNA decay rates (r = 0.66). These results agree with a transcript-specific contribution of both mRNA synthesis and decay to the establishment of steady-state gene expression in mESCs. mRNA half-life measurements showed an overall good correlation with mRNA stability determined in mESCs after inhibition of transcription using actinomycin D (r = 0.77; Supplementary Fig. 11e).

SLAM-seq uncovers molecular determinants of mRNA stability

To further validate SLAM seq, we performed mechanistic studies on two specific post-transcriptional gene regulatory pathways with well-established biological functions in mESCs.

First, we focused on microRNAs (miRNAs), which act as key regulators of gene expression. In mESCs, they contribute to cell-state maintenance and transitions by tuning the expression of ESC transcripts and promoting their clearance during differentiation. At the molecular level, miRNAs act as guides for ribonucleoprotein complexes that target complementary sites, usually in the 3’ UTR of mRNAs, as defined by miRNA seed sequence (nucleotides 2 to 7 or 8 of the miRNA). MicroRNAs elicit their function by repressing translation and/or promoting mRNA decay, although the relative contribution of repressive modes remains a matter of debate and may vary in different biological contexts. We determined the stability of miRNA targets in wild-type mESGs by inspecting the half-life of transcripts harboring in their 3’ UTR target sites for the...
miR-291-3p/294-3p/295-3p/302-3p and miR-292a-3p/467a-5p family (referred to as the miR-291a family), which share the same seed sequence and derive from the ESC-specific miR-290-295 cluster that gives rise to more than half of all small RNAs expressed in this cell type (Supplementary Fig. 13b). With a median half-life of 2.9 h (n = 1,450 transcripts), miR-291a family targets were significantly less stable than transcripts without sites (t1/2 = 4.0 h, n = 5,095 transcripts, Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test, P < 10−15; Fig. 5a ). Transcripts with conserved sites exhibited an even shorter half-life (t1/2 = 2.6 h, n = 50 transcripts; Fig. 5a ). To confirm the direct contribution of miRNAs to transcript destabilization, we determined changes in mRNA half-life by sU pulse labeling followed by SLAM seq in mESCs depleted of the core miRNA biogenesis factor exportin-5 (Xpo5) by CRISPR–Cas9 (Supplementary Fig. 13c,d). Depletion of Xpo5 reduced overall miRNA levels by more than 90%, and miR-291a-family members by more than 95%, as determined by northern hybridization (Supplementary Fig. 13e) and small RNA sequencing (Student’s t test, P < 10−4; Supplementary Fig. 13f). We observed a significant increase in relative mRNA stability for targets of the miR-291a family when compared with transcripts without target site (KS test, P < 10−15 and P < 10−4 for all or conserved sites, respectively; Fig. 5b). Notably, the degree of de-repression followed previously established rules for miRNA targeting (Fig. 5c and Supplementary Fig. 13a). Although each site type responded to Xpo5 depletion with a significant increase in mRNA stability (KS test, P < 10−5), 6-mer target sites exhibited the weakest effects, followed the two 7-mer site types (Fig. 5c). 8-mer sites showed the strongest de-repression (Fig. 5c). Finally, by inspecting target mRNAs of less abundant miRNA families, we confirmed that miRNA function, as determined by target mRNA stability in wild-type mESCs and relief of repression following depletion of Xpo5, was directly dependent on small RNA abundance (Supplementary Fig. 13g–i), as previously described.

Second, we focused on N6-methyladenosine (m6A), the most abundant internal modification in mammalian mRNA, which has been implicated in the regulation of various physiological processes. In ESCs, m6A facilitates the resolution of naïve pluripotency toward differentiation. At the mechanistic level, the m6A mark impinges on various aspects of mRNA processing, including mRNA stability (Supplementary Fig. 14a). To estimate the effect of m6A on mRNA stability in mESCs, we first determined the general association of m6A targets, as mapped previously by m6A RNA immunoprecipitation and sequencing, with mRNA stability in wild-type cells. With a half-life of 3.1 h, m6A-containing transcripts (n = 3,492 transcripts) were significantly less stable than naive transcripts (t1/2 = 4.6 h, n = 3,173 transcripts, KS test, P < 10−15; Fig. 5d). N6-methyladenosine marks do not distribute evenly in mRNAs, but are enriched in long exons, near stop codons and in 3’ UTRs, although m6A also occurs in the coding region (CDS) and 5’ UTRs (Fig. 5e). We investigated the relationship between the position of m6A in targeted mRNAs and its effect on RNA decay. We found that mRNAs containing m6A exclusively in the CDS (n = 545) or in the 3’ UTR (n = 2,093 transcripts) were significantly less stable than naive transcripts (KS test, P < 10−15; Fig. 5e). In contrast, mRNAs that contained m6A exclusively in the 5’ UTR (n = 88) were not less stable than naive transcripts (KS test, P > 0.05; Fig. 5e). To confirm the causal contribution of m6A to transcript destabilization, we determined changes in mRNA half-life by sU pulse labeling followed by SLAM seq in mESCs depleted of Mettl3, the catalytic subunit of the m6A RNA methyltransferase complex, which resulted in the codepletion of its RNA-binding partner protein Mettl14 (Supplementary Fig. 14b,c). Consistent with a direct and position-dependent effect of m6A on mRNA decay, we observed a significant increase in relative mRNA stability for transcripts containing m6A in the CDS or 3’ UTR (KS test, P < 10−15), but not in the 5’ UTR (P > 0.05; Fig. 5f). Similar results were obtained when re-investigating recently described m6A profiling data in mESCs (Supplementary Fig. 14d-f).

**DISCUSSION**

Recent efforts in decoding RNA modifications have led to the emergence of epitranscriptome sequencing technologies profiling...
ribbonucleotide modifications on a genomic scale\textsuperscript{13,14}. Here we present an orthogonal-chemistry-based sequencing strategy for the identification of s\textsuperscript{4}U, which is widely used for in vivo, ex vivo and in vitro RNA labeling and represents a natural base modification in eubacterial and archaeal RNA\textsuperscript{1,3,33}.

Combining SLAM seq with Quant-seq provides several advantages with important practical and conceptual implications. First, the specific sampling of poly-adenylated RNA species assigns kinetics to functional, fully processed RNA polymerase II transcripts (Fig. 2 and Supplementary Fig. 6). Second, it provides access to mRNA 3\prime isoform-specific expression dynamics (Supplementary Fig. 7). Third, by eliminating the requirement to normalize for transcript length, Quant-seq facilitates downstream data analysis (Supplementary Fig. 6). Fourth, Quant-seq produces highly reproducible results from as little as 100 pg of total RNA, without a requirement for rRNA depletion, thereby providing access to cellular systems for which starting material is limiting. Finally, high sequencing coverage across inherently U-rich 3\prime UTRs facilitates the robust quantification of T > C conversions. Note that Quant-seq restricts gene expression analysis to RNA polymerase II transcripts and fails to differentiate transcript variants such as splice isoforms. However, alternative sequencing methods may augment the applicability of SLAM seq, as s\textsuperscript{4}U-identification by sequencing is in principle compatible with any RNA library preparation method that involves a reverse transcription step.

Studying intracellular RNA kinetics by s\textsuperscript{4}U metabolic RNA labeling requires general and method-specific considerations to be taken into account; s\textsuperscript{4}U-incorporation was previously linked to rRNA processing defects in human cancer cells\textsuperscript{34}. Because s\textsuperscript{4}U uptake can vary between cell types, careful assessment of cell-type-specific toxicity is imperative to meet s\textsuperscript{4}U-labeling conditions that do not affect gene expression or cell viability (Supplementary Fig. 5)\textsuperscript{35}. In mESCs, nontoxic concentrations of 100 \mu M s\textsuperscript{4}U result in a median s\textsuperscript{4}U incorporation of 2.29\% across 8,408 transcripts following long-term metabolic labeling (that is, 24 h), corresponding to one s\textsuperscript{4}U incorporation in every 43 uridines at steady-state labeling conditions (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 8c). Considering the U content of mRNA 3\prime UTRs (~31\% in mESCs), SLAM seq recovers each s\textsuperscript{4}U-labeled transcript at a probability of up to 35\% or 70\% in single-read 50 or 100 sequencing reactions, respectively, which enables labeled-transcript identification in even short s\textsuperscript{4}U pulse-labeling conditions (Fig. 3). Note that the ability to determine de novo synthesized transcripts will depend on the cellular s\textsuperscript{4}U uptake kinetics, the overall transcriptional activity of the cell type and the library sequencing depth. Thus, these parameters need to be taken into account when designing a SLAM seq experiment, particularly when employing short s\textsuperscript{4}U pulse labeling, where sequencing depth demands adjustments to the given cellular parameters. In that respect, s\textsuperscript{4}U-tagging approaches (such as, TT-seq) may provide some advantage over SLAM seq when analyzing transient RNA species that escape detection by standard RNA sequencing approaches\textsuperscript{8}.

METHODS

Methods, including statements of data availability and any associated accession codes and references, are available in the online version of the paper.

Note: Any Supplementary Information and Source Data files are available in the online version of the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank J. Jude (Research Institute of Molecular Pathology, IMP) for generously providing a modified version of plenti-CRISPR-v2-GFP. G. Krssakova and K. Mechtler (IMP, Vienna) for high-performance liquid chromatography analysis, IMP/Institute of Molecular Biotechnology (IMBA) Biopticis facility for FACS support, and all laboratory members for support and discussions. Mass spectrometry was performed at the Vienna Biocenter Core Facilities (VBCF) Metabolomics unit (http://www.vbcf.ac.at), funded by the City of Vienna through the Vienna Business Agency. High-throughput sequencing was performed at the VBCF NGS Unit (http://www.vbcf.ac.at). This work was supported by grants from the European Research Council to S.L.A. (ERC-StG-338252) and J.Z. (ERC-StG-336860) and the Austrian Science Fund to S.L.A. (Y-733-B22 START, W-1207-B09 and SFB F43-22) and A.v.H. (W-1207-B09). The IMP is generously supported by Boehringer Ingelheim.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

V.A.H. and S.L.A. conceived the approach and wrote the paper. V.A.H., B.R. and S.L.A. developed the methods, performed the experiments and analyzed the data. W.W. performed initial s\textsuperscript{4}U-alkylation experiments. T.N., P.R., V.A.H., J.Z., A.v.H. and S.L.A. developed SLAM-DUNK. P.B., T.R.B., V.A.H. and S.L.A. performed mRNA 3\prime end annotation.

COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The authors declare competing financial interests: details are available in the online version of the paper.

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ONLINE METHODS
A step-by-step protocol is available as a Supplementary Protocol and as an open resource in Protocol Exchange36.

Carboxymidomethylation of s4U. If not indicated otherwise, carboxymidomethylation was performed under standard conditions (50% DMSO, 10 mM iodoacetamide, 50 mM sodium phosphate buffer pH8, for 15 min at 50 °C) using either 1 mM 4-thiouracil (Sigma), 800 µM 4-thiouridine (Sigma) or 5–50 µg total RNA prepared from s4U metabolic labeling experiments. The reaction was quenched by addition of excess DTT.

Adsorption measurements. 1 mM 4-thiouracil was incubated under optimal reaction conditions (10 mM sodium phosphate buffer (pH 8; 50% DMSO) at 50 °C for 15 min if not indicated otherwise. Reaction was quenched by the addition of 100 mM DTT and adsorption spectra were measured on a Nanodrop 2000 instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific), followed by baseline subtraction of adsorption at 400 nm.

Mass spectrometry. 40 nmol 4-thiouridine were reacted in the absence or presence of 0.05, 0.25, 0.5 or 5 µmol iodoacetamide under standard reaction conditions (50 mM sodium phosphate buffer, pH 8; 50% DMSO) at 50 °C for 15 min. The reaction was stopped with 1% acetic acid. Acidified samples were separated on a Ultimate U300 BioRSLC HPLC system ( Dionex; Thermo Fisher Scientific), employing a Kinex F5 Pentafluorophenyl column (150 mm x 2.1 mm; 2.6 µm, 100 Å; Phenomenex) with a flow rate of 100 µl/min. Nucleosides were on-line analyzed using a TSQ Quantiva mass spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific) after electrospray ionization with the following SRMs: 4-thiouridine m/z 260 → 240, and alkylated 4-thiouridine m/z 318 → 186. Data were interpreted using the Trace Finder software suite (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and manually validated.

To determine s4U incorporation events in polyadenylated or total RNA by mass spectrometry, total RNA was either subjected to oligo(dT) enrichment using Dynabeads Oligo (dT)25 (Ambion) following manufacturer’s instructions to purify polyadenylated RNA or directly enzymatically degraded to monomeric ribonucleosides as described previously before Mass spectrometry analysis37.

Primer extension assays. Primer extension assays were essentially performed as described previously38. Briefly, template RNA oligonucleotides (5L-let-7-3L or 5L-let-7-sUp9-3L; Dharmacon; see Supplementary Table 3 for sequences) were deprotected according to the instructions of the manufacturer and purified by denaturing polyacrylamide gel-elution. 100 µM purified RNA oligonucleotides were treated with 10 mM iodoacetamide (+IAA) or EtOH (–IAA) in standard reaction conditions (50% DMSO, 50 mM sodium phosphate buffer, pH8) for 15 min at 50 °C. The reaction was stopped by addition of 20 mM DTT, followed by ethanol precipitation. RT primer (see Supplementary Table 3 for sequence) was 5’ radiolabeled using γ32P-ATP (Perkin-Elmer) and T4-poly nucleotide kinase (NEB), followed by denaturing polyacrylamide gel-purification. 640 nM γ32P-RT primer was annealed to 400 nM 5L-let-7-3L or 5L-let-7-sUp9-3L in 2 x annealing buffer (500 mM KCl, 50 mM Tris pH 8.3) in a PCR machine (3 min 95 °C, 30 s 85 °C Ramp 0.5 °C/s, 5 min 25 °C Ramp 0.1 °C/s). Reverse transcription was performed using Superscript II (Invitrogen), Superscript III (Invitrogen), or Quant-seq RT (Lexogen) as recommended by the manufacturer. For dideoxynucleotide reactions, a final concentration of 500 µM ddNTP (as indicated) was added to RT reactions. Following completion, RT reactions were resuspended in formamide loading buffer (Gel loading buffer II, Thermo Fisher Scientific) and subjected to 12.5% denaturing PAGE. Gels were dried, exposed to storage phosphor screen (PerkinElmer), imaged on a Typhoon TRIO variable mode imager (Amersham Biosciences), and quantified using ImageQuant TL v7.0 (GE Healthcare). For analysis of RT drop-off, signal-intensities at p9 were normalized to preceding drop-off signal intensities (bg; Supplementary Fig. 3b) for individual reactions. Values reporting the change in drop off signal (+IAA/–IAA) for s4U-containing and non-containing RNA oligonucleotides were compared for the indicated reverse transcriptases.

HPLC analysis of s4U-labeled RNA. Analysis of s4U-incorporation into total RNA following metabolic labeling was performed as previously described37.

Cell viability assay. 5,000 mESCs were seeded per 96 well the day before the experiment. After onset of the experiment, media containing the indicated concentration of s4U was replaced every three hours for a total of 12 h or 24 h. Cell viability was assessed by CellTiter-Glo Luminescent Cell Viability Assay (Promega) according to the instructions of the manufacturer. Luminescent signal was measured on Synergy (BioTek) using Gen5 Software (v2.09.1).

Cell culture. mESCs (clone AN3-12), derived from C57BL/6j129 F1 females, were obtained from IMBA Haplobank (Elling, U., Wimmer, R.A., Leibbrandt, A., Burkard, T., Michlits, G., Leopoldi, A., Michel, T., Abdeen, D., Zhuk, S., Aspalter, I.M., Handt, C., Liebergesell, J., Hubmann, M., Husa, A.-M., Kinzer, M., Schuller, N., Wetzl, E., van der Loo, N., Arturo, J., Martinez, Z., Estoppey, D., Riedl, R., Yang, F., Fu, B., Dechat, T., Ivics, Z., Agu, C.A., Bell, O., Blaas, D., Gerhardt, H., Hoeplner, D., Stark, A. & Penninger, J.M., unpublished data) and cultured in 15% FBS (Gibco), 1x penicillinstreptomycin solution (100 µU/ml penicillin, 0.1 mg/ml streptomycin, Sigma), 2 mM L-glutamine (Sigma), 1x MEM Non-essential amino acid solution (Sigma), 1 mM sodium pyruvate (Sigma), 50 µM 2-Mercaptoethanol (Gibco) and 20 ng/ml LIF (in-house produced). Cells were maintained at 37 °C with 5% CO2 and passaged every second day. Cell doubling time of AN3-12 mES in presence of s4U cells as determined by cell counting was 14.7h. Prior to metabolic labeling experiments, mESCs were stained with Hoechst33342 and FACScan-sorted to obtain a pure diploid population39.

SLAM seq in mESCs. See Protocol Exchange for detailed information regarding SLAM seq36. mESCs were seeded the day before the experiment at a density of 106 cells/ml s4U-metabolic labeling in mESCs was performed by incubating mESCs in standard medium but adding s4U (Sigma) to a final concentration of 100 µM and media exchange every 3 h for the duration of the pulse. For the uridine chase experiment, cells were washed twice with 1x PBS and incubated with standard medium supplemented with 10 mM uridine (Sigma). At respective time points, cells were harvested followed by total RNA extraction using TRIzol (Ambion) following the manufacturer’s instructions but including 0.1 mM DTT.

doi:10.1038/nmeth.4435
(final concentration) during isopropanol precipitation. RNA was resuspended in 1 mM DTT. For a typical SLAM seq experiment, 5 μg total RNA were treated with 10 mM iodoacetamide under optimal reaction conditions and subsequently ethanol precipitated and subjected to Quant-seq 3′-end mRNA library preparation.

**RNA library preparation.** Standard RNA seq libraries were prepared using NEBNext Ultra Directional RNA Library Prep Kit for Illumina (NEB) following the instructions of the manufacturer. Cap-seq libraries were prepared as previously described. mRNA 3′ end sequencing was performed using the Quant-seq mRNA 3′ end library preparation kit (Lexogen) according to the instructions of the manufacturer. Small RNA libraries were generated as described before, but adding total RNA from *Arabidopsis thaliana* unopened floral buds as spike-in before initial size-selection. Sequencing was performed on Illumina HiSeq 2500. Libraries were sequenced in SR50 mode except for transcriptional output measurements (Fig. 3), which were sequenced in SR100 mode.

**Transcriptional inhibition by actinomycin D.** 3 × 10^5 AN3-12 mESCs were seeded per 35-mm plate and grown over night. To block transcription, actinomycin D (Sigma) was added to the medium at the concentration of 5 μg/ml. Cells were harvested at 0, 0.25 h, 0.5 h, 1 h, 2 h, 3 h and 10 h after addition of actinomycin D by directly lysing them in TRIzol (Ambion). RNA was extracted following the manufacturer instructions and libraries were prepared using Quant-seq mRNA 3′-end library preparation kit (Lexogen) according to the instructions of the manufacturer.

**CRISPR–Cas9 genome engineering.** gRNAs were designed using WTSI Genome Editing42. gRNA oligonucleotides (see Supplementary Table 3) were cloned into pLenti-CRISPR-v2-GFP vector as described43, but modified by replacing the puromycin resistance cassette with GFP. Prior to gRNA transfection targeting Xpo5 or Mettl3, wildtype An3-12 mESCs were FACS sorted for haploid cells as described previously. 3 × 10^5 cells were seeded per six wells and transfected the next day with 3 μg pLenti-CRISPR-v2-GFP using Lipofectamine 2000 as recommended by the manufacturer. 48 h after transfection, GFP-positive cells were sorted by fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) and 1,500 cells were subsequently seeded per 15-cm plate. Single colonies were picked after 10 d. DNA isolation, PCR amplification (for oligonucleotide sequences, see Supplementary Table 3) of the targeted locus and Sanger sequencing was performed to genotype the clonal cell lines. Protein depletion was confirmed by western blot analysis.

**Western blotting.** Protein lysates were separated on 10% SDS PAGE and transferred to PVDF membrane (BioRad). Antibodies were used at a dilution of 1:500 for anti-Exportin-5 (H-300, sc-19728), anti-Exportin-5 (9H4, sc-19727), anti-Exportin-5 (Y157, sc-19726), anti-Exportin-5 (Y158, sc-19725), anti-Exportin-5 (Y155, sc-19729), anti-Exportin-5 (Y156, sc-19730), and 1:10,000 for anti-Actin (A2066, Sigma, rabbit) and detected using ImageLab v5.1.1 (Bio-Rad) or by Amersham Hyperfilm ECL (GE Healthcare).

**Northern blotting.** Northern hybridization experiments were performed as described previously. For northern probes, see Supplementary Table 3.

**Bioinformatics and data analysis.** Gel images were quantified using ImageQuant v7.0a (GE Healthcare). Curve fitting was performed according to the integrated rate law for a first-order reaction in Prism v7.0 (GraphPad) or R (v2.15.3) using the minpack.lm package.

For sequencing analysis of synthetic RNA samples (Fig. 1d and Supplementary Fig. 4) barcoded libraries were demultiplexed using Pidcard Tools BamIndexDecoder v1.13 allowing 0 mismatches in the barcode. Resulting files were converted to fastq using picard-tools SamToFastq v1.82. Cutadapt v1.7.1 was used to trim adapters (allowing for default 10% mismatch in adapter sequence) and filter for sequences of 21-nt length. Resulting sequences were aligned to aligned to mature dme-let-7 sequence (TGAGGTAGTAGGTTGTATAGT) using bowtie v0.12.9 allowing for three mismatches and converted to bam using samtools v0.1.18. ‘N’-containing sequences were filtered from alignment. Remaining alignments were converted to pileup format. Finally, fractions of each conversion per position were extracted from pileup. Output table was analyzed and plotted in Excel v15.22 (Microsoft) and Prism v7.0a (GraphPad).

For standard RNA sequencing data analysis, barcoded libraries were demultiplexed using Pidcard Tools BamIndexDecoder v1.13 allowing one mismatch in the barcode. Adapters were clipped using cutadapt v1.5 and reads were size-filter for ≥15 nucleotides. Reads were aligned to mouse genome mm10 using STAR aligner v2.5.2b45. Alignments were filtered for alignment scores ≥0.3 and alignment identity ≥0.3 was normalized to read length. Only alignments with ≥30 matches were reported and chimeric alignments with an overlap ≥15 bp were allowed. Two-pass mapping was used. Introns < 200 kb were filtered and alignments containing non-canonical junctions were filtered. Alignment with a mismatch to mapped bases ratio ≥0.1 or with a max. number of 10 mismatches were excluded. The max number of gaps allowed for junctions by 1,2,3, N reads was set to 10, 20, 30 and 50 kb, respectively. The minimum overhang length for splice junctions on both sides for (1) non-canonical motifs, (2) GT/AG and CT/AC motif, (3) GC/GT and CT/GC motif, (4) AT/AC and GT/AT motif was set to 20, 12, 12, 12, respectively. ‘Spurious’ junction filtering was used and the maximum number of multiple alignments allowed for a read was set to 1. Exonic reads (Gencode) were quantified using FeatureCounts46.

For Cap analysis gene expression (Cap-Seq), barcoded libraries were demultiplexed using Pidcard Tools BamIndexDecoder v1.13 allowing one mismatch in the barcode. The first 4nt of the reads were trimmed using seqtk. Reads were screened for ribosomal RNA by aligning with BWA (v0.6.1) against known rRNA sequences (RefSeq). The rRNA subtracted reads were aligned with TopHat (v1.4.1) against the *Mus musculus* genome (mm10). Maximum multihits was set to 1, segment-length to 18 and segment-mismatch to 1. Additionally, a gene model was provided as GTF (Gencode VM4).

For analysis of mRNA 3′-end sequencing (Quant-seq) data sets, reads were demultiplexed using Pidcard Tools BamIndexDecoder v1.13 allowing one mismatch in the barcode. Quant-seq data was processed using Digital Unmasking of Nucleotide conversion-containing k-mers (DUNK), SLAM-DUNK v0.2.4, a
For comparison of Quant-seq and RNA-seq, we employed RefSeq transcripts of mm10 from UCSC’s table browser (downloaded 2017-02-14) consisting of 35,805 transcripts which we mapped to 24,440 Entrez genes. All transcripts for a given gene were merged using bedtools51. Stranded coverage tracks for Quant-seq and RNA-seq samples were created using deeptools’ bamCoverage command52, using a binSize of 1 and normalizing to RPKM. Next, the density matrix was calculated separately for + and − strand genes, with static windows 500 bp in both directions at TSS and TTS and dynamic binning for the remaining gene body. Stranded signal from the density matrix was plotted in composite plots.

For transcriptional output analysis, the number of normalized reads (in cpm; steady-state expression) and the number of normalized reads containing ≥1 T > C conversion (in cpm; transcriptional output) were obtained for every gene after aligning SLAM seq data with SLAM-DUNK to the mouse genome mm10. Background T > C reads (T > C reads observed without s4U labeling) were subtracted from the T > C reads in the 45-min time point and an expression threshold of >5 cpm for the mean of steady-state expression was set. Genes were classified as proximal to ‘no’, ‘OSN’ or ‘strong/super’ enhancer as described previously18.

GRO-seq data from mESCs was downloaded from GEO (GSE27037)20. Reads were mapped to mm10 using bowtie allowing for uniquely mapping reads with at most two mismatches. Unmapped reads were reiteratively trimmed by one nucleotide and remapped until reaching a minimum length of 20 nucleotides. GRO-seq signal was assessed using featureCounts for the full length gene omitting the first kilobase. Transcriptional output as determined by SLAM seq was then compared to GRO-seq for all genes that are expressed above 5cpm in Quant-seq data sets and detected in GRO-seq data sets.

To calculate RNA half-lives, T > C conversions were background-subtracted (no s4U treatment) and normalized to chase-onset. Curve fitting was performed according to the integrated rate law for a first-order reaction in R (v2.15.3) using the minpack.lm package. RNA half-lives > 24 h were set to 24 h. If not stated otherwise an R² cutoff of >0.6 was applied. To calculate RNA half-lives normalized to cell cycle length, T > C conversions were multiplied by 2(time point/14.7h).

To calculate RNA stabilities measured by polymerase II inhibition (ActD treatment), reads from the Actinomycin D-treated samples were aligned to mm10 using SLAM-DUNK. Transcripts were extracted that were expressed ≥5 cpm in the SLAM seq experiment. To correct for the relative increase in stable transcripts following global transcriptional inhibition, data was normalized to the 50 most stable transcripts. Half-lives were calculated by fitting data to a single-exponential decay model as described above.

GO terms enrichment analysis was performed using PANTHER database with a custom reference set consisting of genes expressed >5 cpm in mESCs53. For gene-set enrichment analysis, gene-association with GO terms ‘regulation of transcription’ (GO:0006357), ‘cell cycle’ (GO:0007049), ‘translation’ (GO:0006412) and ‘extracellular matrix’ (GO:0031012) were derived from AmiGO54. Transcripts were pre-ranked based on the difference half-life to the mean half-life after log₂-transformation. GSEAPreranked was performed using GSEA v.2.2.4 (refs. 55,56).

T > C aware alignment software package based on NextGenMap49 developed to recover T > C conversions from SLAM seq data sets Neumann, T., Herzog, V.A., Muhar, M., von Haeseler, A., Zuber, J., Ameres, S.L. & Rescheneder, P., unpublished data). Briefly, adapter-clipped reads were trimmed 12 bp from the 5′ end (-5 12) and polyadenylated stretches (>4 subsequent As at the 3′ end) were removed. Trimmed reads were aligned to the full reference genome (mm10) using local alignment scoring and up to 100 alignments were reported for multimapping reads (-n 100). In the filtering step, alignments with a minimum identity of 95% and a minimum of 50% of the read bases mapped were retained. Among multimappers, reads mapping to no or ambiguously to > 1 annotated UTR sequence (bed files provided in GEO data sets) were discarded (-fb). If a multimapping read mapped > 1 time to the same annotated UTR sequence, one alignment was randomly picked. SNPs exceeding a coverage cutoff of 10x and a variant fraction cutoff of 0.8 were called using VarScan2.4.1 using default parameters50. Non-SNP overlapping T > C-conversions with a base quality of Phred score >26 were identified. T > C containing reads and total reads aligning within the custom defined counting windows (bed files provided in GEO data sets) were reported. T > C conversion rate was determined for each position along the custom defined counting windows by normalizing to genomic T content and coverage of each position and averaged per UTR.

For extended mRNA 3′-end annotation, we assembled a pipeline to annotate 3′ ends of mRNA transcripts using Quant-seq data sets (https://github.com/AmeresLab/UTRannotation). Quant-seq data was pre-processed as described above. To determine exact priming sites, reads with continuous 3′ terminal A stretches (>4) and a length of at least 23 nt were retained. Polymeric A-stretches were trimmed from the 3′ ends of reads and mapped to mm10 using SLAM-DUNK’s map and filter module as described above but using global alignment scoring. Priming sites were identified based on mapping of > = 10 reads to genomic positions and consecutive positions were merged. Genomic A content of ≥0.26 and ≥0.24 was used to identify internal priming events (for polyA site-containing and no-polyA site-containing priming sites respectively, see Supplementary Fig. 7 for PAS sequences). Priming sites overlapping with RefSeq and ENSEMBL 3′ UTR annotations were considered for further analysis (UTRends). RNA-seq signal, mapped as described above, was used to identify intergenic ends. RNA-seq coverage was calculated using bedtools multicov in 200-nt bins separated by 20 nt starting from the last 200 nt of gene annotations. Bins were extended until RNA-seq coverage dropped below 10% compared to the first bin or until the bin overlapped another gene annotation. Priming sites overlapping identified counting bins were retained (intergenicEnds). For each gene, all identified 3′ ends were ranked by underlying counts and ends that did not exceed 10% of the total signal were removed. RefSeq-annotated mRNA 3′ ends were then included and 250-nt counting windows were created upstream of 3′ ends. Overlapping counting windows were merged. Beyond protein coding mRNAs, counting windows were added for the following classes of non-coding RNAs: antisense, bidirectional_promoter_IncRNA, lincRNA, macro_IncRNA, processed_transcript, sense_intronic, sense_overlapping and primary miRNAs. To annotate 3′ UTR start positions for de novo annotated 3′ ends, each 3′ end was assigned to the most proximal 3′ UTR start annotation (RefSeq).
MicroRNA targets were predicted using Targetscan v7 (ref. 57). Briefly, we provided a 60-way multiple genome alignment against mm10 and our custom 3′-end annotation to create a tailored database of conserved miRNA targets. The output was then intersected with our data, filtered, and grouped according by site type. To determine site conservation, cutoffs for branch length score were set to ≥1.6 (7-mer-1a), ≥1.3 (7-mer-m8) and ≥0.8 (8-mer).

Relative RNA stabilities were determined by performing SLAM seq after 3 h and 12 h 54U pulse labeling in wild-type or knockout cell lines. The background subtracted T > C conversion rates at 3 h were normalized to 12 h and relative stabilities for control (treated with non-targeting gRNA44) and knockout cells were assessed from the following equation: ln(2) / ln(1-(T > C conversion [3h]/ T > C conversion [12h])).

N6-methyladenosine-targets were extracted from ref. 28 and batch coordinate conversion (liftOver) from mm9 to mm10 (UCSC) was performed, or from ref. 32. Tags in 3′ UTRs were refined by overlapping the genomic coordinates with the custom mESC annotation.

Statistics. Statistical analyses (as indicated in text and figure legends) were performed in Prism v7.0a (GraphPad), Excel v15.22 (Microsoft) or R (v2.15.3 and v3.3).

Data availability statement. Sequencing data associated with this manuscript is available at GEO under the accession number GSE99978. All main and supplementary figures have associated source data. A pipeline for extended mRNA 3′-end annotation is available at github (https://github.com/AmeresLab/UTRannotation). The DUNK analysis pipeline for SLAM seq data analysis is available for download (http://t-neumann.github.io/slamdunk/).

A Life Sciences Reporting Summary is available.

36. Herzog, V.A. et al. Thiol-linked alkylation for the metabolic sequencing of RNA (SLAMseq). Protoc. Exch. http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/protx.2017.105 (2017).
37. Spitzer, J. et al. PAR-CLIP (photoactivatable ribonucleoside-enhanced crosslinking and immunoprecipitation): a step-by-step protocol to the transcriptome-wide identification of binding sites of RNA-binding proteins. Methods Enzymol. 539, 113–161 (2014).
## Experimental design

1. **Sample size**
   - Describe how sample size was determined.
   - No statistical method to pre-determine sample size were used.

2. **Data exclusions**
   - Describe any data exclusions.
   - No data were excluded from the analyses.

3. **Replication**
   - Describe whether the experimental findings were reliably reproduced.
   - All attempts at replication were successful.

4. **Randomization**
   - Describe how samples/organisms/participants were allocated into experimental groups.
   - No randomization was used.

5. **Blinding**
   - Describe whether the investigators were blinded to group allocation during data collection and/or analysis.
   - Investigators were not blinded to allocation during experiments and outcome assessment.

   Note: all studies involving animals and/or human research participants must disclose whether blinding and randomization were used.

6. **Statistical parameters**
   - For all figures and tables that use statistical methods, confirm that the following items are present in relevant figure legends (or in the Methods section if additional space is needed).

   n/a | Confirmed
   --- | ---
   - ☑ The exact sample size \((n)\) for each experimental group/condition, given as a discrete number and unit of measurement (animals, litters, cultures, etc.)
   - ☑ A description of how samples were collected, noting whether measurements were taken from distinct samples or whether the same sample was measured repeatedly
   - ☑ A statement indicating how many times each experiment was replicated
   - ☑ The statistical test(s) used and whether they are one- or two-sided (note: only common tests should be described solely by name; more complex techniques should be described in the Methods section)
   - ☑ A description of any assumptions or corrections, such as an adjustment for multiple comparisons
   - ☑ The test results (e.g. \(P\) values) given as exact values whenever possible and with confidence intervals noted
   - ☑ A clear description of statistics including central tendency (e.g. median, mean) and variation (e.g. standard deviation, interquartile range)
   - ☑ Clearly defined error bars

   See the web collection on statistics for biologists for further resources and guidance.
7. Software

Describe the software used to analyze the data in this study. Please refer to the "Bioinformatics and Data analysis" (Online Methods) section for software and algorithms used in this study.

For manuscripts utilizing custom algorithms or software that are central to the paper but not yet described in the published literature, software must be made available to editors and reviewers upon request. We strongly encourage code deposition in a community repository (e.g. GitHub). Nature Methods guidance for providing algorithms and software for publication provides further information on this topic.

8. Materials availability

Indicate whether there are restrictions on availability of unique materials or if these materials are only available for distribution by a for-profit company. No unique materials were used for this study. Cell lines are available through IMBA Haplobank without any restrictions.

9. Antibodies

Describe the antibodies used and how they were validated for use in the system under study (i.e. assay and species). Please refer to "Western Blotting" in the Online Methods section for the information about antibodies used in this study.

10. Eukaryotic cell lines

a. State the source of each eukaryotic cell line used. Mouse embryonic stem cells (AN3-12 clone) was obtained from Haplobank (U. Elling; personal communication); please refer to "Cell culture" in the Online Methods section.

b. Describe the method of cell line authentication used. Cnv, karyotyping, rna seq, morphology

c. Report whether the cell lines were tested for mycoplasma contamination. The cell lines used in this study were tested on a regular basis (at least once a month) and were always tested negative for mycoplasm.

d. If any of the cell lines used are listed in the database of commonly misidentified cell lines maintained by ICLAC, provide a scientific rationale for their use. No cross-contaminations reported according to ICLAC for mouse embryonic stem cells (AN3-12).

11. Description of research animals

Provide details on animals and/or animal-derived materials used in the study. No animals were used.

12. Description of human research participants

Describe the covariate-relevant population characteristics of the human research participants. The study did not involve human research participants.