On the Sample Complexity of Adversarial Multi-Source PAC Learning

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Abstract

We study the problem of learning from multiple untrusted data sources, a scenario of increasing practical relevance given the recent emergence of crowdsourcing and collaborative learning paradigms. Specifically, we analyze the situation in which a learning system obtains datasets from multiple sources, some of which might be biased or even adversarially perturbed. It is known that in the single-source case, an adversary with the power to corrupt a fixed fraction of the training data can prevent PAC-learnability, that is, even in the limit of infinitely much training data, no learning system can approach the optimal test error. In this work we show that, surprisingly, the same is not true in the multi-source setting, where the adversary can arbitrarily corrupt a fixed fraction of the data sources. Our main results are a generalization bound that provides finite-sample guarantees for this learning setting, as well as corresponding lower bounds. Besides establishing PAC-learnability our results also show that in a cooperative learning setting sharing data with other parties has provable benefits, even if some participants are malicious.

1. Introduction

An important problem of current machine learning research is to make learned systems more trustworthy. One particular aspect of this is robustness against data of unexpected or even adversarial nature. Robustness at prediction time has recently received a lot of attention, in particular with work on the detection of out-of-distribution conditions (Hendrycks & Gimpel, 2017; Liang et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018) and protection against adversarial examples (Raghunathan et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2019). Robustness at training time, however, is represented less prominently, despite also being of great importance. One reason might be that learning from a potentially adversarial data source is very hard: a classic result states that when a fixed fraction of the training dataset is adversarially corrupted, successful learning in the PAC sense is not possible anymore (Kearns & Li, 1993). In other words, there exists no robust learning algorithm that could overcome the effects of adversarial corruptions in a constant fraction of the training dataset and approach the optimal model, even in the limit of infinite data.

In this work, we study the question of robust learning in the multi-source case, i.e. when more than one dataset is available for training. This is a situation of increasing relevance in the era of big data, where machine learning models tend to be trained on very large datasets. To create these, one commonly relies on distributing the task of collecting and annotating data, e.g. to crowdsourcing (Sheng & Zhang, 2019) services, or by adopting a collective or federated learning scenario (McMahan & Ramage, 2017).

Unfortunately, relying on data from other parties comes with the danger that some of the sources might produce data of lower quality than desired, be it due to negligence, bias or malicious behaviour. Consequently, the analogous question to the classic problem described above is the following, which we refer to as adversarial multi-source learning. Given a number of i.i.d. datasets, a constant fraction of which might have been adversarially manipulated, is there a learning algorithm that overcomes the effect of the corruptions and approaches an optimal model?

In this work, we study this problem formally and provide a positive answer. Specifically, our main result is an upper bound on the sample complexity of adversarial multi-source learning, that holds as long as less than half of sources are manipulated (Theorem 1).

A number of interesting results follow as immediate corollaries. First, we show that any hypothesis class that is uniformly convergent and hence PAC-learnable in the classical i.i.d. sense is also PAC-learnable in the adversarial multi-source scenario. This is in stark contrast to the single-source situation where, as mentioned above, no non-trivial hypothesis class is robustly PAC-learnable. As a second consequence, we obtain the insight that in a cooperative learning setting where multiple sources are available, sharing data with other parties has provable benefits, even if some participants are malicious.
scenario, every honest party can benefit from sharing their
data with others, as compared to using their own data only,
even if some of the participants are malicious.

Besides our main result we prove two additional theorems
that shed light on the difficulty of adversarial multi-source
learning. First, we prove that the naïve but common strategy
of simply merging all data sources and training with
some robust procedure on the joint dataset cannot result
in a robust learning algorithm (Theorem 2). Second, we
prove a lower bound on the sample complexity under very
weak conditions (Theorem 3). This result shows that under
adversarial conditions a slowdown of convergence is
unavoidable, and that in order to approach optimal perfor-
mance, the number of samples per source must necessarily
grow, while increasing the number of sources need not help.

2. Related work
To our knowledge, our results are the first that formally char-
acterize the statistical hardness of learning from multiple
i.i.d. sources, when a constant fraction of them might be
adversarially corrupted. There are a number of conceptually
related works, though, which we will discuss for the rest of
this section.

Qiao & Valiant (2018), as well as the follow-up works of
Chen et al. (2019); Jain & Orlitsky (2019), aim at estimating
discrete distributions from multiple batches of data, some
of which have been adversarially corrupted. The main dif-
cerence to our results is the focus on finite data domains
and estimating the underlying probability distribution rather
than learning a hypothesis.

Qiao (2018) studies collaborative binary classification: a
learning system has access to multiple training datasets and
a subset of them can be adversarially corrupted. In this setup,
the uncorrupted sources are allowed to have different input
distributions, but share a common labelling function. The
author proves that it is possible to robustly learn individual
hypotheses for each source, but a single shared hypothesis
cannot be learned robustly. For the specific case that all data
distributions are identical, the setup matches ours, though
only for binary classification in the realizable case, and with
a different adversarial model.

In a similar setting, Mahloujifar et al. (2019) show, in par-
ticular, that an adversary can increase the probability of any
"bad property" of the learned hypothesis by a term at
least proportional to the fraction of manipulated sources.
These results differ from ours, by their assumption that dif-
ferent sources have different distributions, which renders
the learning problem much harder.

In Konstantinov & Lampert (2019), a learning system has
access to multiple datasets, some of which are manipulated,
and the authors prove a generalization bound and propose an
algorithm based on learning with a weighted combination
of all datasets. The main difference to our work is that their
proposed method crucially relies on a trusted subset of the
data being known to the learner. Their adversary is also
weaker, as it cannot influence the data points directly, but
only change the distribution from which they are sampled,
and the work does not provide finite sample guarantees.

There are a number of classic results on the fundamental
limits of PAC learning from a single labelled set of samples,
a fraction of which can be arbitrarily corrupted, e.g. (Kearns
& Li, 1993; Bshouty et al., 2002). We compare our results
against this classic scenario in Section 4.1.

Another related general direction is the research on
Byzantine-resilient distributed learning, which has seen sig-
nificant interest recently. e.g. (Blanchard et al., 2017; Chen
et al., 2017; Yin et al., 2018; 2019; Alistarh et al., 2018).
There the focus is on learning by exchanging gradient up-
dates between nodes in a distributed system, an unknown
fraction of which might be corrupted by an omniscient ad-
versary and may behave arbitrarily. These works tend to
design defences for specific gradient-based optimization al-
gorithms, such as SGD, and their theoretical analysis usually
assumes strict conditions on the objective function, such as
convexity or smoothness. Nevertheless, the (nearly) tight
sample complexity upper and lower bounds developed for
Byzantine-resilient gradient descent (Yin et al., 2018) and its
stochastic variant (Alistarh et al., 2018) are relevant to our
results and are therefore discussed in detail in Sections 4.2
and 5.2.

The work of Awasthi et al. (2017) considers learning from
crowdsourced data, where some of the workers might be-
have arbitrarily. However, they only focus on label cor-
rupions. Feng (2017) consider the fundamental limits of
learning from adversarial distributed data, but in the case
when each of the nodes can iteratively send corrupted up-
dates with certain probability. Feng et al. (2014) provide a
method for distributing the computation of any robust learn-
ing algorithm that operates on a single large dataset. There
is also a large body of literature on attacks and defences for
federated learning, e.g. (Bhagoji et al., 2019; Fung et al.,
2018). Apart from focusing on iterative gradient-based
optimization procedures, these works also allow for natu-
ral variability in the distributions of the uncorrupted data
sources.

After the submission deadline, two further relevant works
have appeared on ArXiv. In particular, (Jain & Orlitsky,
2020) extend the framework of (Qiao & Valiant, 2018) to
learning of distributions over infinite domains, from un-
trusted batches of data. They also develop a robust algorithm
for binary classification, achieving similar statistical rates
to ours. Regarding hardness results, (Hanneke & Kpotufe,
2020) recently gave a number of sample complexity lower bounds for multi-task learning with \( N \) tasks that share an optimal hypothesis. Their work shows in particular that no learning procedure can achieve optimal risk as \( N \to \infty \), even in this non-adversarial setting, as long as the number of data points per task is constant and the learner has no additional information about the relationship between the tasks, apart from the given data.

### 3. Preliminaries

In this section we introduce the technical definitions that are necessary to formulate and prove our main results. We start by reminding the reader of the classical notion of PAC-learnability and uniform convergence, as they can be found in most machine learning textbooks. We then introduce the setting of learning from multiple sources and notions of adversaries of different strengths.

#### 3.1. Notation and Background

Let \( \mathcal{X} \) and \( \mathcal{Y} \) be given input and output sets, respectively, and \( \mathcal{D} \in \mathcal{P}(\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}) \) be a fixed but unknown probability distribution. By \( \ell : \mathcal{Y} \times \mathcal{Y} \to \mathbb{R} \) we denote a loss function, and by \( \mathcal{H} \subset \{ h : \mathcal{X} \to \mathcal{Y} \} \) a set of hypotheses. All of these quantities are assumed arbitrary but fixed for the purpose of this work.

A (statistical) learner is a function \( \mathcal{L} : \cup_{m=1}^{\infty} (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^m \to \mathcal{H} \). In the classic supervised learning scenario, the learner has access to a training set of \( m \) labelled examples, \( \{(x_1, y_1), \ldots, (x_m, y_m)\} \), sampled i.i.d. from \( \mathcal{D} \), and aims at learning a hypothesis \( h \in \mathcal{H} \) with small risk, i.e. expected loss, under the unknown data distribution,

\[
\mathcal{R}(h) = \mathbb{E}_{(x,y) \sim \mathcal{D}}(\ell(h(x), y)).
\]

PAC-learnability is a key property of the hypothesis set, which ensures the existence of an algorithm that performs successful learning:

**Definition 1 (PAC-Learnability).** We call \( \mathcal{H} \) (agnostic) probably approximately correct (PAC) learnable with respect to \( \ell \), if there exists a learner \( \mathcal{L} \) and a function \( m_{H,\ell} : (0,1) \times (0,1) \to \mathbb{N} \), such that for any \( \epsilon, \delta \in (0,1) \), whenever \( S \) is a set of \( m \geq m_{H,\ell}(\epsilon, \delta) \) i.i.d. labelled samples from \( \mathcal{D} \), then with probability at least \( 1 - \delta \) over the sampling of \( S \),

\[
\mathcal{R}(\mathcal{L}(S)) \leq \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \mathcal{R}(h) + \epsilon.
\]

Another important concept related to PAC-learnability is that of uniform convergence.

**Definition 2 (Uniform convergence).** We say that \( \mathcal{H} \) has the uniform convergence property with respect to \( \ell \) with rate \( s_{H,\ell,\epsilon} \), if there exists a function \( s_{H,\ell} : \mathbb{N} \times (0,1) \times \bigcup_{m=1}^{\infty} (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^m \to \mathbb{R} \), such that for any distribution \( \mathcal{D} \in \mathcal{P}(X \times Y) \) and any \( \delta \in (0,1) \):

- given \( m \) samples \( S = \{(x_1, y_1), \ldots, (x_m, y_m)\} \) i.i.d. \( \mathcal{D} \), with probability at least \( 1 - \delta \) over the data:

\[
\sup_{h \in \mathcal{H}} |\mathcal{R}(h) - \overline{\mathcal{R}}(h)| \leq s_{H,\ell}(m, \delta, S),
\]

where \( \overline{\mathcal{R}}(h) \) is the empirical risk of the hypothesis \( h \).

- \( s_{H,\ell}(m, \delta, S_m) \to 0 \) as \( m \to \infty \), for any sequence \( (S_m)_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \) with \( S_m \in (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^m \).

Throughout the paper we drop the dependence on \( \mathcal{H} \) and \( \ell \) and simply write \( s \) for \( s_{H,\ell} \). Note that above definition is equivalent to the classic definition of uniform convergence (e.g. Chapter 4 in (Shalev-Shwartz & Ben-David, 2014)). We only introduce an explicit notation, \( s \), for the sample complexity rate of uniform convergence, as this simplifies the layout of our analysis later. It is well-known that uniform convergence implies PAC-learnability and that the opposite is also true for agnostic binary classification (Shalev-Shwartz & Ben-David, 2014).

#### 3.2. Multi-source learning

Our focus in this paper is on learning from multiple data sources. For simplicity of exposition, we assume that they all provide the same number of data points, i.e. the training data consists of \( N \) groups of \( m \) samples each, where \( m, N \in \mathbb{N} \) are fixed integers.

Formally, we denote by \( (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \) the set of all possible collections (i.e. unordered sequences) of \( N \) groups of \( m \) datapoints each. A (statistical) multi-source learner is a function \( \mathcal{L} : \cup_{N=1}^{\infty} \cup_{m=1}^{\infty} (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \to \mathcal{H} \) that takes such a collection of datasets and returns a predictor from \( \mathcal{H} \).

#### 3.3. Robust Multi-Source Learning

Informally, one considers a learning system robust if it is able to learn a good hypothesis, even when the training data is not perfectly i.i.d., but contains some artifacts, e.g. annotation errors, a selection bias or even malicious manipulations. Formally, one models this by assuming the presence of an adversary, that observes the original datasets and outputs potentially manipulated versions. The learner then has to operate on the manipulated data without knowledge of what the original one had been or what manipulations have been made.

**Definition 3 (Adversary).** An adversary is any function \( \mathcal{A} : (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \to (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \).

Throughout the paper, we denote by \( S' = \{S'_1, S'_2, \ldots, S'_N\} \) the original, uncorrupted datasets, drawn i.i.d. from \( \mathcal{D} \), and by \( S = \{S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_N\} = \mathcal{A}(S') \) the datasets returned by the adversary.

Different scenarios are obtained by giving the adversary different amounts of power. For example, a weak adversary
might only be able to randomly flip labels, i.e. simulate the presence of label noise. A much stronger adversary would be one that can potentially manipulate all data and do so with knowledge not only of all of the datasets but also of the underlying data distribution and the learning algorithm to be used later.

In this work, we adopt the latter view, as it leads to much stronger robustness guarantees. We define two adversary types that can make arbitrary manipulations to data sources, but only influence a certain subset of them.

**Definition 4 (Fixed-Set Adversary).** Let \( G \subseteq [N] \). An adversary is called fixed-set (with preserved set \( G \)), if it only influences the datasets outside of \( G \). That is, \( S_i = S_i^G \) for all \( i \in G \).

**Definition 5 (Flexible-Set Adversary).** Let \( k \in \{0, 1, \ldots, N\} \). An adversary is called flexible-set (with preserved set \( G \)), if it only influences the datasets outside of \( G \). That is, there exists a set \( G \subseteq [N] \), such that \( |G| = k \) and \( S_i = S_i^G \) for all \( i \in G \).

In both cases, we call the fraction \( \alpha \) of corrupted datasets the power of the adversary, i.e. \( \alpha = \frac{N - |G|}{N} \) for the fixed-set and \( \alpha = \frac{N - k}{N} \) for the flexible-set adversaries.

While similarly defined, the fixed-set adversary is strictly weaker than the flexible-set one, as the latter one can first inspect all data and then choose which subset to modify, while the former one is restricted to a fixed, data-independent subset of sources. In particular, the flexible-set adversary can already bias the distribution of the data by throwing out a carefully chosen set of sources, before replacing them with new data.

Both adversary models are inspired by real-world considerations and analogs have appeared in a number of other research areas. The fixed-set adversaries can model a situation in which \( N \) parties collaborate on a single learning task, but an unknown and fixed set of them are compromised, e.g. by hackers, that can act maliciously and collude with each other. This is a similar reasoning as in Byzantine-robust optimization, where an unknown subset of computing nodes are assumed to behave arbitrarily, thereby disrupting the optimization progress.

The second adversary corresponds to a situation where a malicious party can observe all of the available datasets and choose which ones to corrupt, up to a certain budget. This is similar to classic models in the fields of robust PAC learning, e.g. (Bshouty et al., 2002), and robust mean estimation, e.g. (Diakonikolas et al., 2019), where the adversary itself can influence which subset of the data to modify once the whole dataset is observed.

Whether robust learning in the presence of an adversary is possible for a certain hypothesis set or not is captured by the following definition:

**Definition 6.** A hypothesis set, \( \mathcal{H} \), is called multi-source PAC-learnable against the class of fixed-set adversaries (or flexible-set adversaries) and with respect to \( \ell \), if there exists a multi-source learner \( \mathcal{L} \) and a function \( m : (0, 1)^2 \to \mathbb{N} \), such that for any \( \epsilon, \delta \in (0, 1) \) and any set \( G \subseteq [N] \) of size \( |G| > \frac{1}{2} N \) (or any \( \alpha < \frac{1}{2} \)), whenever \( S' \subseteq (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \) is a collection of \( N \) datasets of \( m \) i.i.d. labelled samples from \( \mathcal{D} \) each, then with probability at least \( 1 - \delta \) over the sampling of \( S' \):

\[
\mathcal{R}(\mathcal{L}(A(S'))) \leq \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \mathcal{R}(h) + \epsilon,
\]

uniformly against all fixed-set adversaries with preserved set \( G \) (or all flexible-set adversaries of power \( \alpha \)). A learner, \( \mathcal{L} \), with this property is called robust multi-source learner for \( \mathcal{H} \).

In particular, the same learner \( \mathcal{L} \) should work against any adversary and for any \( \alpha \) or set \( G \). In the same time, the adversary is arbitrary once \( \mathcal{L} \) is fixed, so in particular it can depend on the learning algorithm.

Note that the robust learner should achieve optimal error as \( m \to \infty \), while \( N \) can stay constant. This reflects that we want to study adversarial multi-source learning in the context of a constant and potentially not very large number of sources. In fact, our lower bound results in Section 5 show that the adversary can always prevent the learner from approaching optimal risk in the opposite regime of constant \( m \) and \( N \to \infty \).

### 4. Sample Complexity of Robust Multi-Source Learning

In this section, we present our main result, a theorem that states that whenever \( \mathcal{H} \) has the uniform convergence property, there exists an algorithm that guarantees a bounded excess risk against both the fixed-set and the flexible-set adversary. We then derive and discuss some instantiations of the general result that shed light on the sample complexity of PAC learning in the adversarial multi-source learning setting. Finally, we provide a high-level sketch of the theorem’s proof.

#### 4.1 Main result

**Theorem 1.** Let \( N, m, k \in \mathbb{N} \) be integers, such that \( k \in [N/2, N] \). Let \( \alpha = \frac{N - k}{N} < \frac{1}{2} \) be the proportion of corrupted sources. Assume that \( \mathcal{H} \) has the uniform convergence property with rate function \( s \). Then there exists a learner \( \mathcal{L} : (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \to \mathcal{H} \) with the following two properties.

(a) Let \( G \) be a fixed subset of \([N]\) of size \(|G| = k\). For
Adversarial Multi-Source PAC Learning

As an immediate consequence we obtain:

The learner \( \alpha_m \) risk less than \( \alpha \). Functions, no learning algorithm can learn a hypothesis with sampled elements evaluate a fraction \( \alpha \) of single dataset PAC robustness. In particular, Bshouty Discussion. Corollary 1 is in sharp contrast with the situation of the learner works regardless of the choice of \( G \) by the definition of uniform convergence. Since the same left hand sides of (5) and (6) converge to \( \bar{\alpha} \) of (5) and \( \bar{\alpha} \) of (6), we have

\[
\bar{\alpha}(\bar{\delta} + \sqrt{\frac{2\alpha}{m\alpha}}) + 6\log(\frac{\alpha}{m\alpha}) + 2\alpha \max_{i \in [N]} \{s_i\},
\]

uniformly against all fixed-set adversaries with preserved set \( G \), where \( S = \{S_1, \ldots, S_N\} = \mathcal{A}(S') \) is the dataset modified the adversary and \( S_G = \bigcup_{i \in G} S_i \) is the set of all uncorrupted data.

(b) For \( S' = \{S'_1, \ldots, S'_N\} \), \( \mathcal{D} \), with probability at least \( 1 - \delta \) over the sampling of \( S' \):

\[
\mathcal{R}(\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{A}(S'))) - \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \mathcal{R}(h)
\]

\[
\leq 2s(km, \frac{\delta}{2N}, S_{G}) + 6\alpha \max_{i \in [N]} \{s_i\},
\]

uniformly against all flexible-set adversaries with preserved size \( k \), where \( S = \{S_1, \ldots, S_N\} = \mathcal{A}(S') \) is the dataset returned by the adversary, \( G \) is the set of sources not modified by the adversary and \( S_G = \bigcup_{i \in G} S_i \) is the set of all uncorrupted data.

The learner \( \mathcal{L} \) is in fact explicit, we define and discuss it in the proof sketch that we provide in Section 4.3. The complete proof is provided in the supplementary material.

As an immediate consequence we obtain:

**Corollary 1.** Assume that \( \mathcal{H} \) has the uniform convergence property. Then \( \mathcal{H} \) is multi-source PAC-learnable against the class of fixed-set and the class of flexible-set adversaries.

**Proof.** It suffices to show that for any \( \delta \in (0, 1) \), the right hand sides of (5) and (6) converge to 0 for \( m \to \infty \). This it true, since \( s(m, \delta, S) \to 0 \) as \( m \to \infty \) for any \( \delta \) and \( S \), by the definition of uniform convergence. Since the same learner works regardless of the choice of \( G \) and/or \( \alpha \), the result follows.

**Discussion.** Corollary 1 is in sharp contrast with the situation of single dataset PAC robustness. In particular, Bshouty et al. (2002) study a setup where an adversary can manipulate a fraction \( \alpha \) datapoints out of a dataset with \( m \) i.i.d.-sampled elements. The authors show that in the binary realizable case, for any hypothesis space with at least two functions, no learning algorithm can learn a hypothesis with risk less than \( 2\alpha \) with probability greater than 1/2. Similarly, Kearns & Li (1993) showed that for an adversary that modifies each data point with constant probability \( \alpha \), no algorithm can learn a hypothesis with accuracy better than \( \alpha/(1 - \alpha) \). Both results hold regardless of the value of \( m \), thus showing that PAC-learnability is not fulfilled.

4.2. Rates of convergence

While Theorem 1 is most general, it does not yet provide much insight into the actual sample complexity of the adversarial multi-source PAC learning problem, because the rate function \( s \) might behave in different ways. In this section we give more explicit upper bounds in terms of a standard complexity measure of hypothesis spaces – the Rademacher complexity. Let

\[
\mathcal{R}_S(\ell \circ \mathcal{H}) = \mathbb{E}_\sigma\left(\sup_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sigma_i \ell(h(x_i), y_i)\right),
\]

be the (empirical) Rademacher complexity of \( \mathcal{H} \) with respect to the loss function \( \ell \) on a sample \( S = \{(x_1, y_1), \ldots, (x_n, y_n)\} \). Here \( \{\sigma_i\}_{i=1}^{N} \) are i.i.d. Rademacher random variables. Let \( S_G = \bigcup_{i \in G} S_i, \mathcal{R}_i = \mathcal{R}_{S_i}(\ell \circ \mathcal{H}) \) and \( \mathcal{R}_G = \mathcal{R}_{S_G}(\ell \circ \mathcal{H}) \).

4.2.1. Rates for the fixed-set adversary.

An application of Theorem 1 with a standard uniform concentration result gives:

**Corollary 2.** In the setup of Theorem 1, against any fixed-set adversary, it holds that

\[
\mathcal{R}(\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{A}(S'))) - \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \mathcal{R}(h) \leq 4\mathcal{R}_G + 6\sqrt{\frac{\log(\frac{1}{\delta})}{2km}} + \alpha \left(18 \sqrt{\frac{\log(\frac{1}{\delta})}{2m}} + 12 \max_{i \in [N]} \mathcal{R}_i\right).
\]

The full proof is included in the supplementary material.

In many common learning settings, the Rademacher complexity scales as \( O(1/\sqrt{n}) \) with the sample size \( n \) (see e.g. (Bousquet et al., 2004)). Thereby, we obtain the following rates against the fixed-set adversary:

\[
\tilde{\mathcal{O}}\left(\frac{1}{\sqrt{km}} + \frac{1}{\sqrt{m}}\right),
\]

where \( \tilde{\mathcal{O}} \)-notation hides constant and logarithmic factors.

The results in Corollary 2 and Equation (9) allow us to reason about the type of guarantees that can be achieved given a certain amount of data. However, they also imply an explicit upper bound on the sample complexity of adversarial multi-source learning (i.e. an upper bound on the smallest
possible $m(\epsilon, \delta)$ in Definition 6 of the form:

$$m(\epsilon, \delta) \leq \mathcal{O} \left( \frac{\log(N/\delta)}{\epsilon^2} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{1-\alpha}N} + \alpha \right)^2 \right). \quad (10)$$

**Discussion.** We can make a number of observations from Equation (9). The $\sqrt{1/km}$-term is the rate one expects when learning from $k$ (uncorrupted) sources of $m$ samples each, that is from all the available uncorrupted data. The $\sqrt{1/m}$-term reflects the rate when learning from any single source of $m$ samples, i.e. without the benefit of sharing information between sources. The latter enters weighted by $\alpha$, i.e. it is directly proportional to the power of the adversary. In the limit of $\alpha \to 0$ (i.e. all $N$ sources are uncorrupted, $k \to N$), the bound becomes $\mathcal{O}(\sqrt{1/Nm})$. Thus, we recover the classic convergence rate for learning from $Nm$ samples in the non-realizable case. This fact is interesting, as the robust learner of Theorem 1 actually does not need to know the value of $\alpha$ for its operation. Consequently, the same algorithm will work robustly if the data contains manipulations but without an unnecessary overhead (i.e. with optimal rate), if all data sources are in fact uncorrupted.

Another insight follows from the fact that for reasonably small $\alpha$, we have:

$$\tilde{O} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{km}} + \frac{1}{\sqrt{m}} \right) \ll \tilde{O} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{m}} \right), \quad (11)$$

so learning from multiple, even potentially manipulated, datasets converges to a good hypothesis faster than learning from a single uncorrupted dataset. This fact can be interpreted as encouraging cooperation: any of the honest parties in the multi-source setting with fixed-set adversary will benefit from making their data available for multi-source learning, even if some of the other parties are malicious.

**Comparison to Byzantine-robust optimization.** Our obtained rates for the fixed-set adversary can also be compared to the state-of-art convergence results for Byzantine-robust distributed optimization, where the compromised nodes are also fixed, but unknown. Yin et al. (2018) and Alistarh et al. (2018) develop robust algorithms for gradient descent and stochastic gradient descent respectively, achieving convergence rates of order

$$\tilde{O} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{km}} + \frac{1}{\sqrt{m}} + \frac{1}{m} \right) \quad (12)$$

for $\alpha < 1/2$ unknown. Clearly, these rates resemble ours, except for the additional $1/m$-term, which matters when $\alpha$ is 0 or very small. As shown in Yin et al. (2018), this term can also be made to disappear if an upper bound $\beta \geq \alpha$ is assumed to be known a priori.

Overall, these similarities should not be over-interpreted, as the results for Byzantine-robust optimization describe practical gradient-based algorithms for distributed optimization under various technical assumptions, such as convexity, smoothness of the loss function and bounded variance of the gradients. In contrast, our work is purely statistical, not taking computational cost into account, but holds in a much broader context, for any hypothesis space that has the uniform convergence property of suitable rate and without constraints on the optimization method to be used. Additionally, our rates improve automatically in situations where uniform convergence is faster.

4.2.2. Rates for the Flexible-set Adversary

An analogous result to Corollary 2 holds also for flexible-set adversaries:

**Corollary 3.** In the setup of Theorem 1, against any flexible-set adversary, it holds that

$$\mathcal{R} \left( \mathcal{L} (\mathcal{A}(S')) \right) - \min_{h \in H} \mathcal{R}(h) \leq 4\mathcal{R}_G + 12\alpha \max_{i \in [N]} \mathcal{R}_i + \tilde{O} \left( \frac{\sqrt{\alpha}}{\sqrt{m}} \right). \quad (13)$$

The proof is provided in the supplemental material.

Making the same assumptions as above, we obtain a sample complexity rate

$$\tilde{O} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{km}} + \frac{\sqrt{\alpha}}{\sqrt{m}} \right), \quad (14)$$

which differs from (9) only in the rate of dependence on $\alpha^2$, which, if at all, matters only for very small (but non-zero) $\alpha$. Despite the difference, most of our discussion above still applies. In particular, even for the flexible-set adversary the same learning algorithm exhibits robustness for $\alpha > 0$ and achieves optimal rates for $\alpha = 0$.

Moreover, an explicit upper bound on the sample complexity against a flexible-set adversary is given by:

$$m(\epsilon, \delta) \leq \tilde{O} \left( \frac{1}{\epsilon^2} \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{(1-\alpha)N}} + \sqrt{\alpha} \right)^2 \right). \quad (15)$$

4.3. Proof Sketch for Theorem 1

The proof of Theorem 1 consists of two parts. First, we introduce a filtering algorithm, that attempts to determine which of the data sources can be trusted, meaning that it should be safe to use them for training a hypothesis. Note that this
Algorithm 1

\begin{algorithmic}
\State **input** Datasets $S_1, \ldots, S_N$
\State Initialize $T = \{\}$ \Comment{trusted sources}
\For{$i = 1, \ldots, N$}
\If{$d_H(S_i, S_j) \leq s \left( m, \frac{n}{2N}, S_i \right) + s \left( m, \frac{n}{2N}, S_j \right)$, for at least $\left\lfloor \frac{N}{2} \right\rfloor$ values of $j \neq i$, then}
\State $T = T \cup \{i\}$
\EndIf
\EndFor
\State **output** $\bigcup_{i \in T} S_i$ \Comment{all data of trusted sources}
\end{algorithmic}

The output of the algorithm is a new filtered training set, consisting of all data from the trusted sources only. Second, we show that training a standard single-source learner on the filtered training set yields the desired results.

**Step 1.** Pseudo-code for the filtering algorithm is provided in Algorithm 1. The crucial component is a carefully chosen notion of distance between the datasets, called discrepancy, that we define and discuss below. It guarantees that if two sources are close to each other then the difference of training on one of them compared to the other is small.

To identify the trusted sources, the algorithm checks for each source how close it is to all other sources with respect to the discrepancy distance. If it finds the source to be closer than a threshold to at least half of the other sources, it is marked as trusted, otherwise it is not. To show that this procedure does what it is intended to do it suffices to show that two properties hold with high probability: 1) all trusted sources are safe to be used for training, 2) at least all uncorrupted sources will be trusted.

Property 1) follows from the fact that if a source has small distance to at least half of the other datasets, it must be close to at least one of the uncorrupted sources. By the property of the discrepancy distance, including it in the training set will therefore not affect the learning of the hypothesis very negatively. Property 2) follows from a concentration of mass argument, which guarantees that for any uncorrupted source its distance to all other uncorrupted sources will approach zero at a well-understood rate. Therefore, with a suitably selected threshold, at least all uncorrupted sources will be close to each other and end up in the trusted subset with high probability.

**Discrepancy Distance.** For any dataset $S_i \in (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^m$, let

$$\widehat{R}_i(h) = \frac{1}{m} \sum_{(x,y) \in S_i} \ell(h(x), y)$$

be the empirical risk of a hypothesis $h$ with respect to the loss $\ell$. The (empirical) discrepancy distance between two datasets, $S_i$ and $S_j$, is defined as

$$d_H(S_i, S_j) = \sup_{h \in \mathcal{H}} |\widehat{R}_i(h) - \widehat{R}_j(h)|.$$  \hspace{1cm} (17)

This is the empirical counterpart of the so-called discrepancy distance, which, together with its unsupervised form, is widely adopted within the field of domain adaptation (Kifer et al., 2004; Ben-David et al., 2010; Mohri & Medina, 2012).

Typically, the discrepancy is used to bound the maximum possible effect of distribution drift on a learning system. The metric was also used in (Konstantinov & Lampert, 2019) to measure the effect of training on sources that have been sampled randomly, but from adversarially chosen distributions. As shown in Kifer et al. (2004); Ben-David et al. (2010), for randomly sampled datasets, the empirical discrepancy concentrates with known rates to its distributional value, i.e. to zero, if two sources have the same underlying data distributions. The empirical discrepancy is well-defined even for data not sampled from a distribution, though, and together with the uniform convergence property it allows us to bound the effect of training on one dataset rather than another.

**Step 2.** Let $S_T = \bigcup_{i \in T} S_i$ be the output of the filtering algorithm, i.e. the union of all trusted datasets. Then, for any $h \in \mathcal{H}$, the empirical risk over $S_T$ can be written as

$$\widehat{R}_T(h) = \frac{1}{|T|} \sum_{i \in T} \widehat{R}_i(h).$$

We need to show that training on $S_T$, e.g. by minimizing $\widehat{R}_T(h)$, with high probability leads to a hypothesis with small risk under the true data distribution $D$.

By construction, we know that for any trusted source $S_i$, there exists an uncorrupted source $S_j$, such that the difference between $\widehat{R}_i(h)$ and $\widehat{R}_j(h)$ is bounded by a suitably chosen constant (that depends on the growth function $s$). By the uniform convergence property of $\mathcal{H}$, we know that for any uncorrupted source, the difference between $\widehat{R}_i(h)$ and the true risk $R(h)$ can also be bounded in terms of the growth function $s$. In combination, we obtain that $\widehat{R}_T(h)$ is a suitably good estimator of the true risk, uniformly over all $h \in \mathcal{H}$. Consequently, $S_T$ can be used for successful learning.

For the formal derivations and, in particular, the choice of thresholds, please see the supplemental material.

5. Hardness of Robust Multi-Source Learning

We now take an orthogonal view compared to Section 4, and study where the hardness of the multi-source PAC learning stems from and what allows us to nevertheless overcome it. For this, we prove two additional results that describe fundamental limits of how well a learner can perform in the multi-source adversarial setting.
For simplicity of exposition we focus on binary classification. Let $Y = \{-1, 1\}$ and $\ell$ be the zero-one loss, i.e. $\ell(y, \hat{y}) = \|y \neq \hat{y}\|$. Following Bshouty et al. (2002), we define:

**Definition 7.** A hypothesis space $\mathcal{H}$ over an input set $\mathcal{X}$ is said to be non-trivial, if there exist two points $x_1, x_2 \in \mathcal{X}$ and two hypotheses $h_1, h_2 \in \mathcal{H}$, such that $h_1(x_1) = h_2(x_1)$, but $h_1(x_2) \neq h_2(x_2)$.

### 5.1. What makes robust learning possible?

We show that if the learner does not make use of the multi-source structure of the data, i.e. it behaves as a single-source learner on the union of all data samples, then a (multi-source) fixed-set adversary can always prevent PAC-learnability.

**Theorem 2.** Let $\mathcal{H}$ be a non-trivial hypothesis space. Let $m$ and $N$ be any positive integers and let $G$ be a fixed subset of $[N]$ of size $k \in \{1, \ldots, N-1\}$. Let $\mathcal{L} : (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m} \rightarrow \mathcal{H}$ be a multi-source learner that acts by merging the data from all sources and then calling a single-source learner. Let $S' \in (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m}$ be drawn i.i.d. from $\mathcal{D}$. Then there exists a distribution $\mathcal{D}'$ with $\min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} R(h) = 0$ and a fixed-set adversary $\mathcal{A}$ with index set $G$, such that:

$$\Pr_{S' \sim \mathcal{D}'} \left( R(\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{A}(S'))) > \frac{\alpha}{8 \sqrt{m}} \right) > \frac{1}{20}, \quad (19)$$

where $\alpha = \frac{N-k}{N}$ is the power of the adversary.

The proof is provided in the supplemental material. Note that, since the theorem holds for the fixed-set adversary, it automatically also holds for the stronger flexible-set adversary.

The theorem sheds light on why PAC-learnability is possible in the multi-source setting, while in the single source setting it is not. The reason is not simply that the adversary is weaker, because it is restricted to manipulating samples in a subset of datasets instead of being able to choose freely. Inequality (19) implies that even against such a weaker adversary, a single-source learner cannot be adversarially robust. Consequently, it is the additional information that the data comes in multiple datasets, some of which remain uncorrupted even after the adversary was active, that gives the multi-source learner the power to learn robustly.

An immediate consequence of Theorem 2 is also that the common practice of merging the data from all sources and performing a form of empirical risk minimization on the resulting dataset is not a robust learner and therefore suboptimal in the studied context.

### 5.2. How hard is robust learning?

As a tool for understanding the limiting factors of learning in the adversarial multi-source setting, we now establish a lower bound on the achievable excess risk in terms of the number of samples per source and the power of the adversary.

**Theorem 3.** Let $\mathcal{H} \subset \{h : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{Y}\}$ be a hypothesis space, let $m$ and $N$ be any integers and let $G$ be a fixed subset of $[N]$ of size $k \in \{1, \ldots, N-1\}$. Let $S' \in (\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y})^{N \times m}$ be drawn i.i.d. from $\mathcal{D}$. Then the following statements hold for any multi-source learner $\mathcal{L}$:

(a) Suppose that $\mathcal{H}$ is non-trivial. Then there exists a distribution $\mathcal{D}$ on $\mathcal{X}$ with $\min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} R(h) = 0$, and a fixed-set adversary $\mathcal{A}$ with index set $G$, such that:

$$\Pr_{S' \sim \mathcal{D}'} \left( R(\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{A}(S'))) > \frac{\alpha}{8 \sqrt{m}} \right) > \frac{1}{20}, \quad (20)$$

(b) Suppose that $\mathcal{H}$ has VC dimension $d \geq 2$. Then there exists a distribution $\mathcal{D}$ on $\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}$ and a fixed-set adversary $\mathcal{A}$ with index set $G$, such that:

$$\Pr_{S' \sim \mathcal{D}'} \left( R(\mathcal{L}(\mathcal{A}(S'))) - \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} R(h) \right) > \sqrt{\frac{d}{1280Nm} + \frac{\alpha}{16m}} > \frac{1}{64}. \quad (21)$$

In both cases, $\alpha = \frac{N-k}{N}$ is the power of the adversary.

The proof is provided in the supplemental material. As for Theorem 2, it is clear that the same result holds also for flexible-set adversaries with preserved size $k$.

**Analysis.** Inequality (20) shows that even in the realizable scenario, the risk might not shrink faster than with rate $\Omega(\alpha/m)$, regardless of how many data sources, and therefore data samples, are available. This is contrast to the i.i.d. situation, where the corresponding rate is $\Omega(1/Nm)$. The difference shows that robust learning with a constant fraction of corrupted sources is only possible if the number of samples per dataset grows. Conversely, if the number of corrupted datasets is constant, regardless of the total number of sources, i.e., $\alpha = O(1/N)$, we recover the rates for learning without an adversary up to constants.

In inequality (21), the term $\Omega(\sqrt{d/Nm})$ is due to the classic lower bound on the sample complexity of binary classification (e.g. Theorem 3.23 in (Mohri et al., 2018)) and corresponds to the fundamental limits of learning, now in the non-realizable case. The $\Omega(\alpha/m)$-term appears as the price of robustness, and as before, it implies that for constant $\alpha$, $m \rightarrow \infty$ is necessary in order to achieve arbitrarily small excess risk, while just $N \rightarrow \infty$ does not suffice.

**Relation to prior work.** Lower bounds of similar structure as in Theorem 3 have also been derived for Byzantine optimization and collaborative learning. In particular, Yin et al.
We studied the problem of robust learning from multiple sources, with a constant fraction of corrupted sources, the number of samples per source has to grow.

A second emphasis of our work was to highlight connections of the adversarial multi-source learning task to related methods in robust optimization, cryptography and statistics. We believe that a better understanding of these connections will allow us to come up with tighter bounds and to design algorithms that are not only statistically efficient (as was the focus of this work), but also obtain insight into the trade-offs with computational complexity.

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