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Deep Learning for the discovery of new pre-miRNAs: helping the fight against COVID-19

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Abstract

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has been recently found responsible for the pandemic outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In this work, a novel approach based on deep learning is proposed for identifying precursors of small active RNA molecules named microRNA (miRNA) in the genome of the novel coronavirus. Viral miRNA-like molecules have been shown to modulate the host transcriptome during the infection progression, thus their identification is crucial for helping the diagnosis or medical treatment of the disease. The existence of the mature miRNAs derived from computationally predicted miRNA precursors (pre-miRNAs) in the novel coronavirus was validated with small RNA-seq data from SARS-CoV-2-infected human cells. The results demonstrate that computational models could provide accurate and useful predictions of pre-miRNAs in the SARS-CoV-2 genome, underscoring the relevance of machine learning in the response to a global sanitary emergency. Moreover, the interpretability of our model shed light on the molecular mechanisms underlying the viral infection, thus contributing to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the fast development of new treatments. Our study shows how recent advances in machine learning can
be used, effectively, in response to public health emergencies. The approach developed in this work could be of great help in future similar emergencies to accelerate the understanding of the singularities of any viral agent for the development of novel therapies. Data and source code available at: https://sourceforge.net/projects/sourcesinc/files/aicovid/.

Keywords: COVID-19, deep learning, computational prediction, pre-miRNAs.

1. Introduction

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are a special type of small non-coding RNA of ≈22 nucleotides in length that can be found in plants, metazoans and viruses. MiRNAs participate in gene regulation influencing diverse biological processes such as development, proliferation, cell differentiation and metabolism across different cell types (Bartel, 2004; Gurtan & Sharp, 2013). They also play important roles in disease development and progression. MiRNAs are processed from long intermediates, known as miRNA precursors (pre-miRNAs). In animals, the specificity and function of miRNAs are determined by the nucleotides 2 to 7 of the mature region of the miRNAs. The quantification of the dynamic abundance of specific miRNAs can assist in diagnosis, prognosis prediction and therapeutic assessment (Hausser & Zavolan, 2014). Notably, host miRNAs have been recently associated with antiviral defense mechanisms triggered by a coronavirus (Kemp et al., 2020), and the activity of miRNAs derived from viral genomes has also been proved (Li & Zou, 2019; Guzzi et al., 2020).

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the agent responsible for the recent pandemic outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). SARS-CoV-2 is a positive-single stranded RNA virus with a genome of ≈30 kb. The discovery of miRNAs in the novel virus is of paramount importance in the context of the current worldwide sanitary crisis, especially for contributing to the improvement of diagnostic and treatment strategies (Ivaschenko et al., 2020; Huan et al., 2015). Biochemical identification of novel miRNAs is hampered by the requirements for wet/biological
experimental setup, which can be expensive and time-consuming especially in the case of complete genomes (Li et al., 2009). This difficulty led to the development of several computational approaches for predicting miRNAs and their precursors based on genomic information (Allmer & Yousef, 2012; Stegmayr et al., 2018; Bugnon et al., 2020b).

Machine learning (ML) approaches for pre-miRNA prediction involve training a binary classifier following a supervised learning strategy using well-known pre-miRNA sequences (deposited in miRBase\textsuperscript{1} (Kozomara et al., 2018) as the positive class, for identifying genomic regions having the highest chance of being miRNA precursors. The pre-miRNAs adopt a very well-known RNA secondary structure during biogenesis, named stem-loop or hairpin, which allowed the development of feature extraction algorithms for their identification. This secondary structure typically exhibits a few internal loops or asymmetric bulges (Starega-Roslan et al., 2011). Although a large amount of hairpin-like structures can be found in a genome, most of which not behaving as pre-miRNAs. Thus, their correct identification is still a big challenge (Bugnon et al., 2020b).

The computational detection of pre-miRNAs additionally suffers from the presence of very high class-imbalance, which has important consequences on the learning process producing classifiers with very poor predictive accuracy for the minority class. The class-imbalance problem has been largely recognized as an important issue in ML (Haixiang et al., 2017). It occurs when there are significantly lower training examples of one class in comparison to the other one. Most ML algorithms work well with balanced data sets, although imbalanced data used for a supervised classifier can produce a model completely biased towards the majority class, with very low performance on the minority one, and generating many false positives (Bugnon et al., 2020a). In the particular problem of pre-miRNAs prediction, there are only tens or hundreds of well-known pre-miRNAs (the positive class), versus millions of unknown (unlabeled) sequences across the rest of the genome, most of which are really negative class,

\textsuperscript{1}http://www.mirbase.org/
albeit including yet unknown hidden pre-miRNAs. For example, the Anopheles gambiae genome has only 66 well known pre-miRNAs, but more than 4 million hairpin-like sequences, thus giving an imbalance of 1:60,000 (Bugnon et al., 2019). In the case of viruses, for example, the value of imbalance ranges from 1:30 approximately in the bovine leukemia virus, 1:130 in the Epstein-Barr virus, and up to 1:400 in the Herpes virus of turkeys, which has only 8 known pre-miRNAs and a genome of 159 kb.

In the last decade, a growing number of strategies have been proposed for tackling the computational detection of pre-miRNAs with ML (Stegmayer et al., 2018). The first models were based on transcriptomics as input data, using heuristics that have a limited capacity to detect miRNA precursors with low similarity to the reference set (Wei et al., 2014). Instead, more recent proposals overcome this weakness by using features extracted from typical properties of known pre-miRNAs, i.e. the number of loops in a sequence, the average length of the sequence, the minimum free energy when folding the secondary structure (MFE), among many others (Liu et al., 2012; Yones et al., 2015). More recently, deep learning (DL) models have been developed for this task, not requiring any feature engineering since they can automatically extract motifs (patterns of nucleotides) from a set of homologous sequences. This kind of model can be fed with the predicted secondary structure of a sequence coded into a matrix, and the primary sequence information, easily represented with a one-hot encoding matrix (Tang & Sun, 2019).

In the context of the actual sanitary emergency worldwide, many recent articles indicate ML as the methods that can be employed for battling the COVID-19 by integrating and analyzing heterogeneous types of medical information (Hussain et al., 2020; Chakraborty & Mali, 2020). A survey on the state-of-the-art of AI and big data for the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes their speed and importance in responding to the coronavirus outbreak trying to prevent its severe effects (Pham et al., 2020). Furthermore, ML has the potential to aid in rapid evaluation of medical data for differentiation of COVID-19 findings from other clinical entities, for example with DL for images (Harmon et al., 2020).
ML methods in particular have helped fighting the virus, for example, with
COVID-19 detection from X-ray chest image (Ismael & Sengur, 2021); extreme
learning machines (ELM) for drugs recommendation and for the estimation of
Remdesivir drug behavior on the patient’s treatments; with Long/Short Term
Memory (LSTM) models for classifying the best treatment method and for the
estimation of cardiac involvement caused by the viral infection; with Genera-
tive Adversarial Network (GAN) for visualization and detection of new human
coronaviruses and for the probability estimation of the process of viral gastroin-
testinal infection (Jamshidi et al., 2020). All of these studies coincide in how
ML techniques could help in speeding up research and assisting in the current
COVID-19 crisis, and furthermore, how using ML could be a huge advantage in
combating various similar viruses in the future.

Differently from the approaches reviewed, and in front of the full lack of
knowledge about this novel virus nature and behaviour, we believe that deci-
phering the potential activity of novel miRNAs encoded within the viral genome
with ML and hijacking the human transcriptome could help to advance the fron-
tiers of actual strategies for diagnosis and therapeutics. Thus, we have developed
a novel ML approach for finding miRNA precursors in the SARS-CoV-2 genome.
We present here our proposal in detail, and the results obtained. Remarkably,
some candidate pre-miRNAs that were computationally predicted by our pro-
posal have been experimentally identified, very recently, with small RNA-seq
data from SARS-CoV-2 infected human cells.

This paper is organized as follows. Section II explains in detail the ML-based
pipeline designed for finding novel pre-miRNAs in the SARS-CoV-2 genome and
the ML models used in this work. In Section III the data sets used in this study
and the feature extraction process are explained. Section IV shows the results
obtained and their discussion. Finally, the conclusions of this work can be found
in Section V.
2. Identifying novel pre-miRNAs in SARS-CoV-2

2.1. Processing pipeline

The approach developed based on ML for finding pre-miRNAs within the novel coronavirus genome is shown in Figure 1. In the first step, the complete genome of the SARS-CoV-2 is cut into small sequences of a fixed length. This genome pre-processing step is crucial because it has a strong influence on the subsequent steps and the final results. For example, with respect to the cutting window length, if it is set arbitrarily, relevant sequences can be lost. If a too-short window length is used, a sequence with hairpin structure could be cut in half, leading to loss of structural features. If a too-long window length is used, many hairpins can be captured inside the same sequence, thus structural features become more complex and much more difficult to recognize by the classifier. These issues were discussed properly in previous works (Yones et al., 2015; Bugnon et al., 2019). Thus, to prevent these adverse influences and to ensure that no important sequences are lost nor inappropriately trimmed, the genome is cut into overlapped segments longer than the mean length of the pre-miRNAs of interest for the species under processing (in this case, viruses). The length of the cutting window has to be configured to define the maximum size that the stem-loops found will have (then shorter stems can also be identified). A stem-loop is a sequence that, once predicted its secondary structure, fulfills certain conditions such as minimum energy released when folding, unpaired nucleotides at the middle (the loop) and a minimum length in the remaining paired nucleotides (the stem).

The window must be long enough to correctly include a complete hairpin, as well as to take into account the neighborhood of any possible hairpin when estimating the secondary structure. This is very important since the results of estimating a secondary structure can be greatly affected by the neighborhood of the sequences.

The second step consists in the prediction of the secondary structure resulting from the folding of the sequences obtained in the previous windowing.
Figure 1: Processing pipeline based in machine learning for finding potential pre-miRNAs in the genome of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), responsible for the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19): a) Genome cut into sequences, b) Prediction of secondary structure and feature extraction, c) One-hot encoding of the nucleotides (A, U, G, C) and matches (‘(‘) or mismatches (‘.’) in the secondary structure, d) Input feature vector, e) The deeSOM classifier, f) The OC-SVM classifier, g) The mirDNN model.
and cutting step. This is classically done with the RNAfold tool (Hofacker, 2003), an algorithm that uses dynamic programming for finding the secondary structure which minimizes the energy released. Then, simple representations are used to extract the main features of pre-miRNAs, which are based on the inherent characteristics of the sequences and the secondary structure of these types of molecules. Some typical features are, for example, the nucleotides and dinucleotides proportion, the matching triplets, the GC content, the length of the sequence, the MFE, the frequency of occurrence of certain pairs of nucleotides, among many others. A large number of studies indicate that local sequence features as well as secondary structure are very important for pre-miRNAs identification (Li et al., 2009; Allmer & Yousef, 2012; Liu et al., 2012). The candidate sequences, their secondary structures and the set of extracted features are then used as inputs to a ML classifier, specifically designed for pre-miRNA prediction. These classifiers provide scores according to the likelihood of each RNA sequence for being a pre-miRNA. In this study, we have compared three ML methods for this task: a classical model as baseline and two very recently published proposals based on deep learning. Finally, the best model was used for the pre-miRNA predictions in SARS-CoV-2.

2.2. Machine learning models for pre-miRNAs prediction

The ML methods must be trained for identifying RNA sequences highly likely to be miRNA precursors (Stegmayer et al., 2018). Among all possible supervised classifiers, support vector machines (SVM) have been the first and most widely applied algorithm for pre-miRNAs prediction (Xue et al., 2005). A classical supervised approach needs both positive (real well-known pre-miRNA) and negative sequences. In this study, a more recent approach was used, which employs only the positive labeled data for building a classification frontier: the one-class SVM (OC-SVM). It has been shown that this approach can perform better than standard two-classes SVM in pre-miRNA prediction since it is capable of learning a decision frontier only from the well-known pre-miRNAs, avoiding the large class imbalance issue (Yousef et al., 2010). Thus, the OC-SVM
was trained with the features of known viruses pre-miRNAs only from miRBase. Then, the fitted model was used to predict on the sequences extracted from the SARS-CoV-2 full-genome.

The second method was the deeSOM model (Bugnon et al., 2020a), which consists of several hierarchical layers with self-organizing maps (SOM) and that has already proven to be very suited to the pre-miRNA prediction task (Bugnon et al., 2020b). This model has an ensemble of unsupervised SOMs that are used in parallel at the first level. The unlabeled samples are provided as input data by splitting them among the members of the ensemble which also receive the full set of positive class cases. This allows to reduce the imbalance at each SOM in the ensemble, each one learning a different unlabeled subspace. At each SOM layer, pre-miRNA neurons are identified as those having, at least, one positive class sample. Only the sequences that are in pre-miRNA neurons pass to the next level. At each level, the map size of each SOM layer is automatically determined by an adaptive algorithm, depending on the number of sequences that arrive from the previous layer. This changes the distribution of samples on each layer, allowing a further depuration of pre-miRNA candidates. Therefore, several deep layers are added with this self-size-adjusting method, until only known pre-miRNA samples remain at the last map. The best candidate sequences are identified as the ones in the pre-miRNA neurons of the last levels. Thus, the model was trained with the features of known pre-miRNAs sequences from other viruses (positive-class samples), 1 million of negative sequences from the human genome, and the features of all the sequences extracted from the full-genome of the novel coronavirus (marked as unlabeled). The largest possible number of structural features available in literature (Yones et al., 2015) were extracted.

Finally, the third method was mirDNN (Yones et al., 2020b), a convolutional neural network based on a residual network (He et al., 2016). This model is trained directly with raw RNA sequences, their corresponding predicted secondary structure and MFE. Thus, the input is represented as a one-hot-encoding tensor of shape $L \times 4$, being $L$ the maximum sequence length. Each row of the tensor represents the four possible ribonucleotides A, U, G, C and each column
represents a position in the sequence. The tensor size is fixed and completed with zero-padding for sequences shorter than \( L \). The secondary structure is represented as a tensor of shape \( L \times 1 \), where the value of each element indicates the type of match with the opposite nucleotide. These two tensors are concatenated over the first dimension to form a tensor of shape \( L \times 5 \), which is the input of the model. The first layer of this network is a one-dimensional convolution, followed by stacked identity blocks (He et al., 2016) and pooling layers. The identity blocks allow the model to auto-define the number of convolutional layers needed during training, avoiding optimization of this critical hyperparameter. Each block is composed of two activation functions, two batch normalization layers, and two convolutions. The result is summed up to the input of the next identity block, which helps back-propagate the training error, allowing the addition of convolution layers without bothering the training of the model. After the identity blocks, a pooling layer is used to reduce the length \( L \) of the sequence by 2. After several of these stages, another tensor is obtained, which is converted into a one-dimensional vector that then passes through activation and batch normalization layers. Then, the input sequence stability, calculated as \(-\text{MFE}/\text{length of the sequence}\), is appended in order to form a new tensor that feeds a fully connected layer that generates the corresponding output score. For training this model, the focal loss (FL) function (Lin et al., 2020) has been used in order to tackle the high class-imbalance. Usually, when the negative examples (the majority class) are forwarded in the network, they generate an error to be back-propagated through the model whose sum is much larger than the contribution of the (few) positive examples, and the model is heavily biased towards the negative class. Thus, it does not learn the positive class correctly. In order to overcome this problem, the FL function can be used to reduce the weight given to the examples easily classified, and increase the weight of the most difficult samples. Therefore, in an imbalanced scenario the model errors for the minority (in this case, the positive) class and the unlabeled near the positive class increase in importance to a higher extent than the most obvious negative samples, driving the learning of the network. The mirDNN
was trained using the known viral pre-miRNAs as positive class and 1 million of negative sequences from the human genome. After training, the complete genome of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was used for prediction.

3. Data preparation and performance measures

The whole sequence of the novel coronavirus genome was obtained from NCBI Reference Sequence NC_045512.2: Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 isolate Wuhan-Hu-1. The SARS-CoV-2 genome was segmented with Hextractor (Yones et al., 2020a) into 600 nt long fragments with 500 nt overlaps, in order to avoid missing any important structure. The following parameters were used: single loop trimming, minimum sequence length 60, minimum number of base-pairs that must form a sequence 16, and final trimming optimizing the minimum free energy normalized by the sequence length (NMFE). The secondary structure of each segment obtained from the complete genome was predicted by using RNAfold (Hofacker, 2003) with default setting obtaining 597 hairpins in total, which were considered as unlabeled samples. The positive labeled samples (known pre-miRNAs) were downloaded from miRBase v22, retrieving 569 pre-miRNAs of viruses. A total of 73 structural features from the folded sequences of the virus genome and the well-known viruses pre-miRNAs were extracted with miRNAfe (Yones et al., 2015) as in (Bugnon et al., 2019), and normalized with z-score. The included features are: length of the sequence, MFE, cumulative size of internal loops found in the secondary structure, number of loops, absolute and relative GC content, among many others (detailed information in Supplementary Material).

For the validation of the computational predictions on the SARS-CoV-2 premiRNAs, expression profiling by high throughput small RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) of the epithelial lung cancer cell line Calu-3 mock and infected with SARS-CoV-2 (USA-WA1/2020) were obtained from NCBI (Reference series GSE148729, made public on May 4th). To identify human genes and cellular pathways influenced by SARS-CoV-2 infection, Singh et al performed genome-
wide measurements of different aspects of gene expression at the bulk and single-cell level. Calu-3 cell line was mock-treated or infected with SARS-CoV-2 and harvested at different time points. Gene expression profiling was determined using bulk and single-cell polyA RNA-seq, small RNA-seq, and total RNA-seq. Alignment files of small RNA-seq samples against SARS-CoV-2 genome were downloaded from NCBI repository. More details on the biological experiment and sequencing technologies used can be found in (Singh et al., 2020).

In order to compare the ML methods for the same task of pre-miRNA prediction in virus, they have been tested in a cross-validation scheme with a dataset including all the known pre-miRNAs from viruses (positive samples), and different amounts of hairpin-like sequences (negative samples) from the human genome. The performance was assessed with

\[
s^+ = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}, \quad p = \frac{TP}{TP + FP}, \quad F_1 = 2 \frac{s^+ p}{s^+ + p},
\]

where \(TP\), \(FP\) and \(FN\) are the number of true positives, false positives and false negatives, respectively. The sensitivity or recall \((s^+)\) measures how good a classification method is for recognizing (and not missing) the TPs of the problem. The precision \((p)\) measures the relation between TPs and FPs. In a realistic scenario for practical applications, precision is very important in imbalanced datasets because FPs can be many more than the TPs. Thus,
considering the characteristics of the classification problem under study, it is important to take into account both sensitivity and precision. Therefore, $F_1$ was used as a global comparative measure.

Performance curves for the ML methods were drawn using the precision vs recall curve (PRC) plot, since this representation is preferred to assess binary classifiers with imbalanced data. For high imbalances, a classifier can reach a good performance in terms of specificity, but can perform poorly in providing good quality candidates, with a large amount of false positives. Instead, PRC plots can provide a more clear assessment of performance due to the fact that they evaluate the fraction of TPs among the total positive predictions.

4. Results

4.1. Performance of the ML methods with known pre-miRNAs from viruses

Several imbalance ratios (IR) were used to test the models in conditions close to the most common IRs expected in the publicly available viral genomes: 1:50, 1:100, and 1:200. The different IRs were created by maintaining always the same number of positives and varying the number of corresponding negative sequences.

The PRCs of a 10-fold cross-validation of the models presented in Section II.B, for the different imbalance ratios, are shown in Figure 2. Each sub-plot in the Figure shows the PRC for each method at a particular IR, the maximum $F_1$ point over it and the area under the precision-recall curve (AUCPR). Results at the IR 1:50, depicted in Figure 2.a), indicate that mirDNN reached the best performance with maximum $F_1 = 0.74$ and $AUCPR = 0.79$. The second best method was deeSOM, with $F_1 = 0.51$ and $AUCPR = 0.46$. Then OC-SVM had $F_1 = 0.39$ and $AUCPR = 0.34$, close to deeSOM performance and reaching better results at high recall (and very low precision). For IRs of 1:100 and 1:200, the same general behaviour was observed, where $AUCPR$ of deeSOM and OC-SVM was affected by the imbalance (Figure 2.b and Figure 2.c, respectively). From the analysis of all three imbalanced situations, it can be seen that the optimal
operation point, where $F_1$ is maximum, remains almost the same for mirDNN, with losses between 3-5% for different imbalances. However, $F_1$ decreases for deeSOM (13-15%) and especially OC-SVM ($\approx 30\%$) as imbalance rises. This study has shown that methods using traditional features, such as OC-SVM and deeSOM, have close performance at low IR and they can be severely affected by imbalance. Also, it has shown that the mirDNN model can provide good accuracy independently of the imbalance.

4.2. Interpretable predictions of pre-miRNAs in SARS-CoV-2 with deep learning

The identification of potential pre-miRNAs encoded in the SARS-CoV-2 genome was performed with mirDNN, due to its best performance in the comparison of the previous subsection. For each candidate sequence, the method gives a score indicating whether it is a good miRNA precursor candidate (score close to 1) or not (score close to 0). In the case of mirDNN, the activation level of the pre-miRNA output neuron is used as a score.

The experimental validation of these computational predictions involved exploring the read profiles in the regions of the virus genome covered by the predicted precursors in the alignments of small RNA-seq samples (NCBI GSE148729 as described in Section 3). In this analysis, three of the top 5% candidates to pre-miRNAs found by the pipeline proposed in this work have had significant expression in the infected cells and a valid secondary structure in the hairpin (Merino et al., 2020).

Then, since mirDNN is capable of providing interpretable predictions (Selvaraju et al., 2017; Zhang & Zhu, 2018), this model and its scores for the pre-miRNAs candidates with enough expression in infected cells were analyzed in detail. The aim was finding out which parts of those sequences with experimental activity were important for the deep model. Thus, the importance level of each nucleotide of the sequence was measured as follows. First, each input sequence was evaluated with the trained mirDNN model, and the prediction output was used as a reference score for the sequence. Then, all nucleotides
Figure 3: Interpretable prediction of the \textit{sars\textsubscript{cov2}_26601-27201\_stem-392-524} candidate sequence to pre-miRNA in SARS-CoV-2. (top) Importance given by mirDNN to each nucleotide in the sequence. (middle) Experimental reads for this sequence, average of two replicates of the biological experiment. Horizontal blue line indicating the average reads count for the complete genome. (bottom) Corresponding secondary structure predicted using RNAfold, in this case with two possible mature miRNAs marked in red and green, respectively.

were masked one by one, i.e. the corresponding column was converted to an all-zeros vector, and each masked version of the sequence was evaluated again with mirDNN. This way, the decrease in the score for the sequence was used as a measure of each nucleotide importance. In the following, two examples of the importance provided by the deep model to the sequences that have had enough expression are analyzed in detail.

The first example of the coincidence between the importance given by the deep model to the candidate sequence, and the experimental reads, is shown in Figure 3 for the \textit{sars\textsubscript{cov2}_26601-27201\_stem-392-524} sequence. In the top of this Figure, it is shown the importance that mirDNN has assigned to each
nucleotide in the sequence. The vertical axis on the left shows the importance levels of each nucleotide, while the horizontal axis represents the nucleotides within the sequence. It can be seen here that the deep model has given the highest importance to two sections in the middle of the sequence. Figure 3 (middle) shows the corresponding experimental reads average (two biological replicates) for this sequence after 24 hours upon infection with the virus, with a horizontal blue line indicating the average reads count for the complete genome. It is extremely interesting to see high expression in more than one section of the sequence. There is a high coincidence between the deep model attention zones and the regions of the sequence with high experimental reads. In particular, the highest peak of reads around the position 50 is also the point of maximum importance for the deep model. The zones with high reads, close to the central loop, can be used afterwards for the determination of the mature position. The estimated mature portion is the final miRNA molecule which has a biological function. Figure 3 (bottom) shows the secondary structure corresponding to this pre-miRNA, with the two mature miRNAs marked in red and green, respectively, according to the importance given by mirDNN and confirmed with the experimental reads.

The second example is shown in Figure 4 for the *sars_cov2_101-701_stem-379-465* candidate to pre-miRNA. The top of the Figure presents the importance that mirDNN has assigned to each nucleotide in the sequence. It can be seen here that the deep model has given more importance to the zone around the first 25 nucleotides of the sequence. Figure 4 (middle) shows the corresponding reads for this sequence. The expression of this predicted pre-miRNA is clearly seen here according to the notable increase of the reads in the infected tissue at 24 hours upon infection. Remarkably, the region pointed by the deep model shows high overlap with the portion of the predicted pre-miRNA exhibiting a dynamic production of small RNAs during the virus infection, detected by high-throughput sequencing. There is a high coincidence between most parts of the deep model attention (particularly at the beginning) and the zones of the sequence with high experimental reads. Finally, Figure 4 (bottom) shows the
secondary structure corresponding to this pre-miRNA, with its mature miRNA marked in red, which was determined as in the other case according to the importance given by mirDNN and confirmed with the experimental reads.

Once the most likely mature miRNA derived from the pre-miRNA has been determined, it is to predict the corresponding target genes for each of the newly discovered mature miRNAs. After the analysis of the differentially expressed genes and their corresponding functional enrichment, a biological hypothesis could be proposed regarding their regulatory function during the novel coronavirus infection. This will likely contribute to the understanding about how these multiple miRNA-like molecules predicted from the SARS-CoV-2 genome...
... may modulate the host transcriptome upon infection, hopefully helping in the design of innovative strategies for diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19.

5. Discussion

It is important to highlight the advantages of ML models like the ones presented here with respect to the algorithms that would normally be used in this scenario. Generally, the first step when having a new genome for which there is no previous information is to align it against genomes of already known closely-related species, in such a way as to find coding and non-coding areas that are highly similar. To this end, the biological community mainly uses sequence homology search, such as BLAST\textsuperscript{2}. However, this search approach has two major disadvantages. The first one is that finding a similar sequence by alignment does not necessarily guarantee a relationship with its molecular and biological functions. The second one is that it has a very limited capacity to detect miRNA sequences and precursors with low similarity to the reference set. Sequence homology search does not use any additional information from the sequence, such as features (length, stems number, GC content, number of base-pairs, number of nucleotides in the stem region, etc.), while ML models can capture and learn from them. These disadvantages lead to a loss of generalizability in the search for candidate sequences that have similar molecular functions, but differ substantially in their sequences. Hence, ML algorithms emerged here as an advantageous choice to overcome these limitations, identifying candidates by using features automatically learnt from the training set with deep learning, and classifying according to the values of the features and, moreover, their interactions.

The DL approach proposed here has two main advantages over classical methods: generalization capability and automatic explainability of the predicted sequences. The first one, by automatically extracting inherent characteristics of...
the data, the model can find pre-miRNAs that are rare and their sequences are
different to those of well-known in other species. The second advantage has to do
with the capability of analyzing why an algorithm has given a certain score to a
sequence. Instead of the match score given by search or other ML methods, our
deep model can provide a detailed analysis, nucleotide by nucleotide, for making
better global decisions. This allows to assess the attention given by the model
to a certain region of each sequence, in order to determine its most important
part. This way, differently from classical ML methods, the possibility of the
existence of a biological function in the best-ranked candidate sequences can be
hypothesized to be validated and tested with more directed wet-lab trials.

6. Conclusions

In this work we have shown the potential of deep learning (DL) for the
identification of potentially active miRNAs in the SARS-CoV-2 genome. The
candidate sequences that were predicted computationally were also experi-
mentally validated with small RNA-seq data from SARS-CoV-2 infected human
cells, finding effective reads for the candidate mature miRNA molecules. The
approach developed in this work allows finding novel pre-miRNAs upon the
release of the viral genome sequence, even in the absence of associated tran-
scriptomics of infected cells, which could be of great help in future similar emer-
gencies to accelerate the understanding of the singularities of any viral agent for
the development of novel therapies. The approach proposed here has two main
advantages over classical methods: generalization capability and interpretability
for the analysis of the predicted sequences. The pipeline allows the automatic
extraction of inherent features from the raw sequences, finding shares features
more than just exact nucleotides. The deep learning method can perform a
very detailed analysis, nucleotide by nucleotide, which allows to evaluate the
attention given by the model to a certain portion of each sequence, in order to
determine its active region with potential biological function.

The results demonstrate the usefulness of DL in the context of the cur-
rent sanitary crisis worldwide. Immediately after genome sequencing, high-confidence pre-miRNAs candidates can be identified to speed up wet-lab trials, and help the fight against the pandemic and the fast development of new treatments. Furthermore, this approach can be replicated to other harmful RNA viruses that have not been fully characterized yet.

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HIGHLIGHTS

• Deep learning for the identification of microRNA in the novel Sars-CoV-2 virus
• The miRNAs modulate the host transcriptome during infection
• Their identification can be crucial for helping diagnosis or treatment of COVID-19
• This study shows how machine learning can be applied to public health emergencies
• Deep learning interpretability shed light on the mechanisms of the infection
Author Contributions
G.S. and D.H.M: Conceptualization, Methodology. L.B, C.Y, J.R.: Software and bioinformatics tools. G.M.: Expression data curation and analysis. G.S.: Writing- Original draft preparation. D.H.M.: Figures. F.A.: Discussion: All authors: Writing- Reviewing and Editing.
Declaration of interests

☒ The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

☐ The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: