ClampFISH detects individual nucleic acid molecules using click chemistry–based amplification

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Methods for detecting single nucleic acids in cell and tissues, such as fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH), are limited by relatively low signal intensity and nonspecific probe binding. Here we present click-amplifying FISH (clampFISH), a method for fluorescence detection of nucleic acids that achieves high specificity and high-gain (>400-fold) signal amplification. ClampFISH probes form a ‘C’ configuration upon hybridization to the sequence of interest in a double helical manner. The ends of the probes are ligated together using bio-orthogonal click chemistry, effectively locking the probes around the target. Iterative rounds of hybridization and click amplify the fluorescence intensity. We show that clampFISH enables the detection of RNA species with low-magnification microscopy and in RNA-based flow cytometry. Additionally, we show that the modular design of clampFISH probes allows multiplexing of RNA and DNA detection, that the locking mechanism prevents probe detachment in expansion microscopy, and that clampFISH can be applied in tissue samples.

Single-molecule RNA fluorescence in situ hybridization (RNA FISH), which enables the direct detection of individual RNA molecules1–3, has emerged as a powerful technique for measuring both RNA abundance and localization in single cells. Yet, while single-molecule RNA FISH is simple and robust, the total signal generated by single-molecule RNA FISH probes is low, thus requiring high-powered microscopy for detection. This keeps throughput relatively low and precludes the use of downstream detection methods such as flow cytometry. As such, amplification methods for single-molecule RNA FISH with high efficiency, specificity and gain could enable many new applications.

A number of signal amplification techniques are available, but each suffers from particular limitations due to dependence on enzymatic activity or hybridization alone for signal gain. Approaches such as tyramide signal amplification4 or enzyme-ligated fluorescence5 utilize enzymes to catalyze the deposition of fluorescent substrates near the probes. Alternatively, in techniques such as rolling-circle amplification, enzymes ligate oligonucleotides to form a circular probe and then catalyze a ‘rolling-circle’ nucleic acid amplification to generate a repeating sequence, which can be detected using fluorescent oligonucleotides6–8. These methods can lead to large signal gains, but are limited by the accessibility of (sometimes multiple) bulky enzymes that need to diffuse through the fixed cellular environment to reach their target molecules. For example, the DNA ligases frequently used to circularize ‘padlock’ probes are often quite inefficient9, contributing to inconsistent amplification10.

Nonenzymatic amplification schemes, most notably the hybridization chain reaction11–13 and branched DNA14–16 techniques, rely only on hybridization to amplify signal. However, their larger DNA scaffolds, to which fluorescent probes attach, often have limited amplification potential17 and generally lack assay design flexibility for multiplexing. Thus, our goal was to create a nonenzymatic, exponential amplification scheme with high sensitivity (detection efficiency), very high gain (signal amplification), and specificity (low background).

We first designed probes that would bind with high specificity and sensitivity; i.e., that could allow the probes to survive repeated liquid handling in conditions stringent enough to limit nonspecific binding and thus prevent spurious amplification. Padlock probes are a class of circular DNA probes that have these properties: they bind to the target region of complementarity via the 5′ and 3′ ends of the probe, with the intervening sequence, not hybridized to the target, in a ‘C’ configuration18. Conventionally, the ends are then connected using a DNA or RNA19 ligase. This connection, in combination with the DNA:RNA double helix formed upon hybridization, result in a molecule that is physically wrapped around the target strand (Fig. 1a). We wished to retain the benefits of padlock probes without the need for this enzymatic ligation; therefore, we designed padlock-style probes with terminal alkyne and azide moieties at the 5′ and 3′ ends, termed click-amplifying FISH (clampFISH) probes (Fig. 1a and Supplementary Fig. 1). When the clampFISH probe hybridizes to the target RNA, the DNA:RNA hybrid brings the two moieties together in physical space. We then used a click chemistry strategy (copper(I)-catalyzed azide–alkyne cycloaddition, CuAAC20) to covalently link the probes.

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the 5'-alkyne and 3'-azide ends of the probe, effectively forming a loop around the target RNA (Fig. 1a).

To achieve exponential amplification, we first designed a series of primary clampFISH probes to target the RNA sequence of interest. The backbone of each primary clampFISH probe contains two ‘landing pads’ for a set of secondary, fluorescent clampFISH probes. The number of landing pads may be modified to increase amplification (Supplementary Fig. 1). To the backbones of these secondary probes, we hybridized a set of tertiary probes that bind in a 2:1 ratio. In a subsequent round, the secondary probes again bind 2:1 to the backbones of tertiary probes and so on, thereby in principle doubling the signal in each round (Fig. 1b). The resulting probes bound efficiently to the target, as evidenced by the colocalization of clampFISH probes with single-molecule RNA FISH probes targeting the same RNA (Fig. 1c and Supplementary Fig. 2). We observed that many non-colocalizing spots often corresponded to faint single-molecule FISH spots that were not picked up by our thresholding software for single-molecule FISH. The absence of clampFISH spots in our negative controls suggests that these faint spots may in fact be true positive signal. The number of amplification rounds may be adjusted according to the desired degree of amplification required for the particular application (Fig. 1d).

To demonstrate exponential amplification using clampFISH probes, we first targeted and amplified GFP mRNA in a human melanoma cell line (WM983b) stably expressing GFP using a set of ten primary clampFISH probes (Fig. 1e). We used stringent hybridization conditions—specifically, a higher concentration of formamide than is traditionally used for single-molecule RNA FISH—to limit nonspecific probe binding while still allowing specific binding (Supplementary Fig. 3). As the number of rounds progressed, the average number of spots per cell remained constant (for example, at round 2 we detected a mean of 399 spots per cell ± 62 s.e.m. and at round 10 we detected 401 spots per cell ± 36; Fig. 1f), while the intensity of the signal as measured by fluorescence microscopy increased. At round 12, the mean signal per spot was 446-fold higher than in round 2 (Fig. 1i). We observed a 3.9-fold ± 1.29 increase (geometric mean and geometric s.d. of fold changes in average spot intensity in two-round intervals from rounds 2–12) for every two rounds of amplification (for an average 1.69-fold increase per round; Fig. 1g–i). We also observed that the fold amplification decreased slightly at later rounds, and we estimate that the saturation point—we, the estimated point at which no further amplification would occur—would be reached around round 20 (Supplementary Fig. 4).

To assess whether the click reaction aided in the amplification process as hypothesized, we performed the same experiment in the absence of the click ligation of the clampFISH probes. Although the number of spots detected per cell was similar (393 mean spots per cell in the clicked samples vs. 381 mean spots per cell in the non-clicked samples), we observed lower mean signal intensity (26,076 arbitrary units (AU) ± 496 for non-clicked vs. 44,430 AU ± 630 for clicked samples at round 12), as well as a lack of uniformity in spot intensity (coefficient of variation at round 12 for non-clicked samples 0.94 ± 0.013, vs. 0.69 ± 0.01 for clicked samples), demonstrating that the click reaction facilitated a more uniform and higher gain amplification of clampFISH signal (Fig. 1h and Supplementary Fig. 5).

To demonstrate signal specificity, we performed the same clampFISH detection and amplification on the parental cell line that did not have the GFP gene. We detected very few false-positive spots in these cells (mean of 9.77 spots per cell ± 1.45), showing that the signals were specific to the target (Fig. 1e). Although this number is low, it may interfere with the detection of RNAs with few transcripts per cell.

Owing to its relatively low signal intensity, single-molecule RNA FISH typically requires using a microscope equipped with a high-numerical-aperture oil immersion objective. For many applications, a low-magnification air objective is preferable, both for increased throughput and for simplicity of sample handling. We reasoned that the increased signals that clampFISH provided could make RNA FISH signals detectable by low-magnification microscopy (Fig. 2a). To test this, we mixed 20% WM983b cells stably expressing GFP with 80% WM983b cells without GFP and probed for GFP mRNA using clampFISH probes at round 6—this was the minimum number of rounds needed to clearly discern signal at the lowest magnification for this particular target. Using clampFISH, the positive cells were clearly discernible at both 20× and 10× magnification, whereas the conventional single-molecule RNA FISH signal was not (Fig. 2a). To demonstrate the speed of image acquisition for high-throughput applications, we applied clampFISH to detect HIST1H4E, an RNA target lacking a corresponding antibody for detection (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 6). Scanning one well of a 96-well plate took ~21 min at 20× magnification using clampFISH, as opposed to ~4 h at 60× magnification using single-molecule RNA FISH.

Primary tissue samples typically suffer from high background levels that contribute to a low signal-to-noise ratio using single-molecule RNA FISH and therefore require high-magnification microscopy to distinguish positive signal from background. However, at high magnification, large structural features of the tissue are often difficult to discern, and tiled image scanning is relatively slow. To increase the field of view while still imaging individual RNAs, we applied four rounds of clampFISH to kidney samples from 4-day-old C57BL/6J mice and probed for Podxl mRNA, which is highly expressed in podocytes, and observed specific clampFISH signal in the appropriate regions (Fig. 2c and Supplementary Fig. 7). ClampFISH further revealed Podxl to be expressed in the kidney endothelium as well, a signal that was only faintly visible by single-molecule RNA FISH but was clearly detected by clampFISH at low magnification (Fig. 2c). This is consistent with previous findings that Podxl is expressed at low levels in the kidney endothelium and highlights the utility of clampFISH for detection of low-abundance transcripts in tissue.

Another application that clampFISH enables is flow-cytometry-based measurement of RNA expression, an application for which single-molecule RNA FISH typically does not produce enough signal. We applied clampFISH to a mixed population of MDA-MB-231 cells with and without GFP expression and analyzed the cells by flow cytometry (Fig. 2d and Supplementary Figs. 8 and 9), using GFP fluorescence as an independent measure of the specificity of clampFISH signal. We observed separation of GFP-positive cells by clampFISH signal with as few as two rounds of amplification, and observed a 2.447-fold increase in fluorescence intensity in the GFP-positive population with every two rounds of amplification thereafter (geometric mean of fold change across rounds; Fig. 2d and Supplementary Fig. 8). Notably, we observed a decreasing fold-change as we moved through the rounds (3.435-fold from rounds 2–4, 2.589-fold from rounds 4–6, and 1.648-fold from rounds 6–8). We also used clampFISH to sort cells on the basis of endogenous RNA expression for HIST1H4E mRNA and the long non-coding RNA (lncRNA) NEAT1 (Fig. 2e), relatively low abundance targets that cannot be detected using antibodies.

Amplification of RNA signal can also be used in combination with a newly developed expansion microscopy technique that achieves super-resolution microscopy via the physical expansion of cells embedded in polymeric hydrogels. When combined with single-molecule RNA FISH, expansion microscopy can resolve the fine structure of
**Figure 1** Design and validation of clampFISH technology. (a) Schematic of clampFISH probe binding and ligation using CuAAC. (b) ClampFISH workflow for doubling fluorescent signal at every round of hybridization (hyb). (c) Colocalization of GFP mRNA single-molecule RNA FISH signal (left) with GFP mRNA clampFISH signal at round 2 (right; scale bar, 5 µm). (d) Timing and order of clampFISH amplification steps. (e) GFP mRNA clampFISH signal on WM983b-GFP cells across 12 rounds of amplification in the presence of click ligation (top) compared to GFP mRNA clampFISH signal in the absence of click ligation (middle). Bottom, single-cell tracking of the same cell line without GFP mRNA expression across rounds (scale bar, 10 µm). Images are representative single cells selected from three independent experiments. (f) mRNA counts per cells across 12 rounds of amplification. (g) log$_2$(intensity) of click vs. no-click samples across 12 rounds of amplification. Center line, median log$_2$(intensity); box limits, first and third quartile log$_2$(intensity) values; whiskers, observations within 1.5 x the interquartile range of the box limits. (h) Density of the log$_2$(intensity) of all spots detected at round 12 in click vs. no-click samples. (i) Mean fluorescence intensity of GFP mRNA clampFISH signal per cell on WM983b-GFP cells across 12 rounds of clampFISH. All graphs are representative of three independent experiments.
RNAs that are in close proximity to one another; however, the physical expansion of cells results in reduced signal intensities, at least partially as a result of probes dissociating under the low-salt conditions required to obtain high levels of hydrogel expansion. We reasoned that the locking property of clampFISH probes would allow us to maintain signal intensity in the face of these expansion conditions. We thus performed clampFISH on GFP mRNA to round 6, followed by expansion, and observed high signal intensity on all spots when the click reaction was performed, but little signal when click was not performed (Fig. 2d and Supplementary Fig. 10). We also applied clampFISH to amplify NEAT1, a nuclear retained RNA, to round 6 and observed higher signal intensity than with single-molecule RNA FISH (Fig. 2d).
and Supplementary Fig. 10). This also suggests that the nucleus is accessible to clampFISH probes, which can be a problem with other amplification schemes.\(^6\) Notably, we also observed nuclear localization of the GFP mRNA using clampFISH probes (Fig. 1c,e), but did not detect transcription sites. Upon further analysis, we determined that clampFISH probes can enter the nucleus but may have difficulty accessing transcription sites (data not shown), possibly as a result of crowding from RNA secondary structure or nearby proteins.

A key design goal for FISH methods is the ability to detect multiple RNA targets simultaneously. Multiplexing with clampFISH is in principle straightforward because of the modular design of the probes. The backbone sequence of the clampFISH probes can easily be changed, allowing one to use multiple independent amplifiers simultaneously. Many transcripts may be amplified simultaneously with unique backbone sequences that are not labeled with a fluorophore, and the subsequent loop-dendrimer structure can be probed with fluorescently labeled secondary fluorescent oligonucleotides that can be easily removed and rehybridized. As a proof of concept, we selected three RNA targets with distinct expression patterns in HeLa cells: NEAT1, which is found in nuclear paraspeckles of most cells; LMNA, which is found in the cytoplasm of all cells, and HIST1H4E, which is expressed only in the subpopulation of cells that are in S phase. We amplified these with unique sets of nonfluorescent clampFISH probes to seven rounds and then probed the terminal backbones with single-molecule RNA FISH probes, each labeled with different fluorophores (Fig. 3a and Supplementary Fig. 11). We were able to visualize signals from the three different probe sets, even using low-magnification microscopy. We observed that LMNA was present in nuclear paraspeckles and therefore colocalized with the NEAT1 signal. We confirmed that this was not bleedthrough by imaging each probe, amplified to seven rounds in every channel, using the same exposure times and observing no signal in the off-channels (Supplementary Fig. 11).

Our method for the amplification of fluorescent RNA signals in situ is different from other nonenzymatic, hybridization-based technologies because it directly links the probe to the target RNA whereas other systems are susceptible to probe detachment during washes. In a direct comparison with commercially available systems, we observed that other methods’ maximum fluorescence intensity amplification was comparable to that of clampFISH at six rounds (Supplementary Fig. 12); however, the fluorescence intensity of clampFISH far surpassed other methods beyond round 6. Thus, the clampFISH amplification system can enable assays that require extremely high signal gain, especially flow cytometry (Fig. 2c) and high-throughput microscopy of targets with lower expression levels (Fig. 3a). For instance, we were able to detect HIST1H4E mRNA with low-power microscopy even though it is typically expressed at levels of only around 200 molecules per cell\(^{21}\) (Fig. 3a).

Further benefits of clampFISH include tunable, exponential amplification of fluorescence intensity (Fig. 1), modular probe design for simplified and expanded multiplexing capabilities, and compatibility with expansion microscopy. Notably, the ends of the clampFISH probes behave as a proximity ligation wherein the click reaction will occur if and only if the two arms are hybridized adjacent to each other (Supplementary Fig. 13), suggesting that clampFISH may find uses in specifically probing RNA subsets such as splicing junctions, short alternatively spliced variants, or edited RNAs. Finally, we applied a modified clampFISH hybridization scheme to detect 5S rDNA\(^{28}\) loci in single cells (Fig. 3b and Supplementary Fig. 14). When we performed HIST1H4E RNA clampFISH before 5S rDNA clampFISH, we found that the probes can survive these steps and enable simultaneous amplification and imaging of both DNA and RNA (Fig. 3c and Supplementary Fig. 14). The stringent hybridization conditions of DNA FISH are not typically compatible with RNA FISH.

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.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
S.H.R. and A.R. designed the study and wrote the manuscript. I.A.M. performed statistical analysis. S.H.R., M.D., S.B., C.L.J., I.D., O.S., B.E., E.T., A.C., A.S. and J.A.S. designed and performed the experiments.

COMPETING INTERESTS
A.R. receives royalties related to Stellaris RNA FISH probes.

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Cell culture. We cultured WM983b cells and WM983b-GFP-NLS cells (a human metastatic melanoma cell line from the laboratory of M. Herlyn at The Wistar Institute) in tumor specialized medium containing 2% FBS. The WM983b-GFP-NLS contains EGFP fused to a nuclear localization signal driven by a cytomegalovirus promoter that we stably transfected into the parental cell line.

Clamp probe design and synthesis. Clamp probes are 150 nt long (15mer left RNA binding arm, 10 nt left adaptor, 100mer backbone, 10 nt right adaptor, 15mer right RNA binding arm). RNAs are targeted by probe sets containing one or more Clamp probes, each targeting a 30-nt region of RNA (two adjacent 15mer binding arms). We chose binding regions with approximately 40% G+C content as well as minimal repetitive regions using our probe design pipeline (source code available at https://flintbox.com/public/project/50547/) and instructions for use are available in the Supplementary Protocol. We designed backbones so as to minimize predicted secondary structure (using mFold; http://unafold.rna.albany.edu/?q=mfold). We ordered modified DNA oligonucleotides from Integrated DNA Technologies (IDT) as standard DNA oligonucleotides with modifications (5′-phosphate on the backbone, 3′-azide and 5′-phosphate for the right arm and 5′-hexynyl for the left arm). Strands were resuspended in nuclease-free water, at a working stock concentration of 400 µM. The left arm (30 µM), backbone (20 µM) and right arm (30 µM) are brought together using adaptor probes (30 µM each) and denatured at 70 °C for 3 min before being enzymatically ligated using 600 U of T7 DNA ligase (New England Biolabs) for a minimum of 1 h at room temperature. Following ligation, the probes were purified using Monarch purification columns according to the manufacturer’s instructions (New England Biolabs) and eluted in four times the starting volume to make the working dilution. For a schematic protocol and probe sequences, see Supplementary Figure 1 and Supplementary Table 1.

ClampFISH procedure on cultured cells. We grew cells on glass cover slips until ~70% confluent. We washed the cells twice with PBS and then fixed them for 10 min with 4% formaldehyde in PBS at room temperature. We aspirated off the formaldehyde and rinsed twice with PBS before adding 70% ethanol for storage at 4 °C. We incubated our cells for at least 4 h at 37 °C in hybridization buffer (10% dextran sulfate, 2× SSC, 20% formamide) and 0.5 µL of the working dilution of the primary ClampFISH probe. We performed two washes in wash buffer (2× SSC, 10% formamide), each consisting of a 30-min incubation at 37 °C. Then we incubated the cells for at least 2 h at 37 °C in hybridization buffer (10% dextran sulfate, 2× SSC, 20% formamide) and 1 µL of the working dilution of the secondary ClampFISH probe and repeated the washes. After the second wash, we performed the click reaction. A solution containing 75 µM CuSO4, premixed with 150 µM BTAA ligand20 (Jena Biosciences) and 2.5 mM sodium ascorbate (made fresh and added to solution immediately before use; Sigma) in 2× SSC was added to the samples, and these were then incubated for 30 min at 37 °C. The samples were then rinsed briefly with wash buffer, and then we continued cycling this protocol, alternating between secondary and tertiary ClampFISH probes until reaching the desired level of amplification. After the final wash, we rinsed once with 2× SSC/DAPI and once with antifade buffer (10 mM Tris (pH 8.0), 2× SSC, 1% w/v glucose). Finally, we mounted the sample for imaging in an antifade buffer with catalase (Sigma) and glucose oxidase2 (Sigma) to prevent photobleaching. This method is described in more detail in the Supplementary Protocol.

ClampFISH for flow cytometry and sorting. ClampFISH for flow cytometry was performed as described above; however, the cells were kept in suspension. Wash buffer and 2× SSC were supplemented with 0.25% Triton-X, and the clampFISH hybridization buffer was supplemented with the following blocking reagents: 1 µg/mL yeast RNA (Invitrogen), 0.02% w/v bovine serum albumin, 100 ng/µL sonicated salmon sperm DNA (Agilent). We sorted on NEATI and HIST1H4E RNA abundance using a FACSVantage (BD Biosciences) with a 640 nm excitation laser and 660/20 nm emission detector.

ClampFISH for expansion microscopy. Acryloyl-X, SEM (6-((acryloyl)amino)hexanoic acid, succinimidyl ester, here abbreviated AcX; Thermo-Fisher) was resuspended in anhydrous DMSO at a concentration of 10 mg/mL, aliquoted and stored frozen in a desiccated environment. Label-IT amine modifying reagent (Mirus Bio, LLC) was resuspended in the provided Mirus reconstitution solution at 1 mg/ml and stored frozen in a desiccated environment. To prepare LabelX, 10 µL of AcX (10 mg/mL) was reacted with 100 µL of Label-IT amine modifying reagent (1 mg/mL) overnight at room temperature with shaking. LabelX was subsequently stored frozen (~20 °C) in a desiccated environment until use.

Fixed cells were washed twice with PBS and incubated with LabelX diluted to 0.002 mg/mL in MOPS buffer (20 mM MOPS, pH 7.7) at 37 °C for 6 h, followed by two washes with PBS. Monomer solution (PBS, 2 M NaCl, 8.625% (w/w) sodium acrylate, 2.5% (w/w) acrylamide, 0.15% (w/w) N,N′-methylenebisacrylamide) was mixed, frozen in aliquots, and thawed before use. Prior to embedding, monomer solution was cooled to 4 °C to prevent premature gelation. Concentrated stocks (10% (w/w) of ammonium persulfate initiator and tetramethylmethylenediamine accelerator were added to the monomer solution up to 0.2% (w/w) each. One hundred microliters of gel solution specimens were added to each well of a Lab Tek 8 chambered coverslip and transferred to a humidified 37 °C incubator for 2 h.

Proteins were removed from specimens by sonication in water with 0.1 µg/mL DAPI.

ClampFISH for mouse tissues. All studies were carried out under a protocol approved by the Institutional Animal Care And Use Committee at the University of Pennsylvania. Kidneys were collected from 4–6-old C57BL/6J mice. Dissected tissues were embedded in OCT, then flash frozen using liquid nitrogen. Tissue sections 5 µm thick were cut at −20 °C and mounted on charged slides. Slides were washed briefly in PBS, then immersed in 4% paraformaldehyde for 10 min at room temperature. Following fixation, the slides were transferred to 70% ethanol for permeabilization for at least 12 h, or for long-term storage. To begin the clampFISH procedure, slides were transferred to wash buffer for 3 min to equilibrate and then 500 µL of 8% SDS was added to the top of the flat slide for 1 min for tissue clearing. Samples were transferred to wash buffer, and the normal clampFISH procedure was used.

ClampFISH for multiplexing. Primary clampFISH probes for multiple targets (each with a different backbone series) are hybridized and washed at the same time. Each subsequent round is performed together using the respective secondary and tertiary probes, which are colorless. After the terminal round, samples are washed with 10% formamide, 2× SSC, then hybridized with RNA FISH probes in hybridization buffer (10% formamide, 10% dextran sulfate, 2× SSC) overnight at 37 °C. Following hybridization, samples were washed twice with wash buffer, 30 min per wash, and washed four times with water, 1 h per wash, for expansion. Samples were imaged in water with 0.1 µg/mL DAPI.

DNA clampFISH on cultured cells. Probe design is performed the same as with RNA targets, but with 30mer left and right arms. We grew cells on glass coverslips until ~70% confluent. We washed the cells twice with PBS and then fixed them for 10 min with 4% formaldehyde in PBS at room temperature. We aspirated off the formaldehyde and rinsed twice with PBS before adding 70% ethanol for storage at 4 °C. We washed the cells twice for 5 min in PBS, then permeabilized the cells for 15 min at room temperature with PBS supplemented with 0.5% Triton X-100. We washed the cells twice with PBS, then treated the cells with 0.1 M HCl for 5 min. We washed the cells twice with 2× SSC, then treated with an optional incubation of 25 µg/mL RNase A for 30 min at 37 °C. Cells were washed twice with 2× SSC and then equilibrated with 50% formamide in 2× SSC for 30 min. Liquid was aspirated and cells were denatured using 70% formamide, 2× SSC on a hot plate at 78 °C for 4.5 min. We incubated our cells for at least 4 h at 37 °C in hybridization buffer.

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NATURE BIOTECHNOLOGY
All experiments were performed in multiple, independently by drawing a boundary around non-overlapping cells. Unless otherwise specified, we called clampFISH and single-molecule RNA FISH spots using the previously described algorithm in rajlabimagetools (https://bitbucket.org/arjunrajalaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home).

Comparison of amplification methods. GFP mRNA clampFISH was performed to round 6 according to the protocol reported above on WM983b-GFP and WM983b cells. These probes were Cy5 labeled, and signal intensity was compared to a corresponding single-molecule FISH probe set targeting GFP mRNA that was also labeled with Cy5. GFP mRNA was also detected using RNAscope technology according to the manufacturer’s protocol (ACDbio). These probes were Atto 647 labeled, and signal intensity was compared to a corresponding single-molecule FISH probe set targeting GFP mRNA that was also labeled with Atto 647. GFP mRNA was also detected using hybridization chain reaction technology according to the manufacturer’s protocol (Molecular Instruments). These probes were Alexa 647 labeled, and signal intensity was compared to a corresponding single-molecule FISH probe set targeting GFP mRNA that was also labeled with Alexa 647.

Imaging. We imaged each samples on a Nikon Ti-E inverted fluorescence microscope with a cooled CCD camera (Andor iKon 934). For 100× imaging, we acquired z-stacks (0.3 μm spacing between stacks) of stained cells. The filter sets we used were 31000v2 (Chroma), 41028 (Chroma), SP102v1 (Chroma), SP104v2 (Chroma), and SP105 (Chroma) for DAPI, Atto 488, Cy3, Atto 647N/Cy5 and Atto 700, respectively. A custom filter set was used for Alexa 594 (Omega). We varied exposure times depending on the dyes and degree of amplification used. Typically, ClampFISH was imaged with an exposure of 300 ms and single-molecule RNA FISH with an exposure of 2–3 s.

Image analysis. We first segmented and thresholded images using a custom MATLAB software suite (downloadable at https://bitbucket.org/arjunrajalaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home). Segmentation of cells was done manually by drawing a boundary around non-overlapping cells. Unless otherwise specified, we called clampFISH and single-molecule RNA FISH spots using the previously described algorithm in rajlabimagetools (https://bitbucket.org/arjunrajalaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home).

Colocalization analysis. We performed spot colocalization analysis as previously described. Briefly, after initial spot calling, the algorithm used Gaussian fitting to refine spot localization estimates and then a two-stage algorithm incorporating chromatic aberration correction to identify pairs of spots colocalizing across two channels.

Expansion-FISH. We manually segmented cells as described above. We performed spot calling using the modified expansion spot-calling processor in rajlabimagetools, as previously described.

Statistical analysis. All experiments were performed in multiple, independent experiments, as indicated in the figure legends. All statistics and tests are described fully in the text or figure legend. Error bars throughout represent s.e.m. unless otherwise specified.

Code availability. Scripts for all analyses presented in this paper, including all data extraction, processing, and graphing steps are freely accessible at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzcicqy/AAABARZsKtD1TQKMsEOGLnyWa?dl=0. Our image analysis software is available at https://bitbucket.org/arjunrajalaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home, changeset 6aa67c3b68c8dd559fed681e1a21ec67464c65.

Reporting Summary. Further information on experimental design and reagents is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this article.

Data availability. All raw and processed data used to generate figures and representative images presented in this paper are available at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzcicqy/AAABARZsKtD1TQKMsEOGLnyWa?dl=0.

29. Mellis, I.A., Gupta, R., Raj, A. & Rouhanifard, S.H. Visualizing adenosine-to-inosine RNA editing in single mammalian cells. Nat. Methods 14, 801–804 10.1038/nmeth.4332 (2017).
Reporting Summary

Nature Research wishes to improve the reproducibility of the work that we publish. This form provides structure for consistency and transparency in reporting. For further information on Nature Research policies, see Authors & Referees and the Editorial Policy Checklist.

Statistical parameters

When statistical analyses are reported, confirm that the following items are present in the relevant location (e.g. figure legend, table legend, main text, or Methods section).

- **n/a** Confirmed
- □ The exact sample size (n) for each experimental group/condition, given as a discrete number and unit of measurement
- □ An indication of whether measurements were taken from distinct samples or whether the same sample was measured repeatedly
- □ The statistical test(s) used AND whether they are one- or two-sided
  - Only common tests should be described solely by name; describe more complex techniques in the Methods section.
- □ A description of all covariates tested
- □ A description of any assumptions or corrections, such as tests of normality and adjustment for multiple comparisons
- □ A full description of the statistics including central tendency (e.g. means) or other basic estimates (e.g. regression coefficient) AND variation (e.g. standard deviation) or associated estimates of uncertainty (e.g. confidence intervals)
  - For null hypothesis testing, the test statistic (e.g. F, t, r) with confidence intervals, effect sizes, degrees of freedom and P value noted
  - Give P values as exact values whenever suitable.
- □ For Bayesian analysis, information on the choice of priors and Markov chain Monte Carlo settings
- □ For hierarchical and complex designs, identification of the appropriate level for tests and full reporting of outcomes
- □ Estimates of effect sizes (e.g. Cohen's d, Pearson's r), indicating how they were calculated
- □ Clearly defined error bars
  - State explicitly what error bars represent (e.g. SD, SE, CI)

Our web collection on statistics for biologists may be useful.

Software and code

Policy information about availability of computer code

Data collection

All software used to count RNA spots is available at the following link:
https://bitbucket.org/arjunralaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home
Briefly, we used custom Matlab software to segment the cells and assign thresholds to the spots, then analyzed the data using R Studio. All of our code is available at the following link: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzicqcv/AABARZsKtD1TQKMseooG_LnyWa?dl=0

Data analysis

Scripts for all analyses presented in this paper, including all data extraction, processing, and graphing steps are freely accessible at the following url:
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzicqcv/AABARZsKtD1TQKMseooG_LnyWa?dl=0
Our image analysis software is available here: https://bitbucket.org/arjunralaboratory/rajlabimagetools/wiki/Home, changeset 6aa67c3b68c8dd5599fed681e1a21ec674464c65. All raw and processed data used to generate figures and representative images presented in this paper are available at the following url:
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzicqcv/AABARZsKtD1TQKMseooG_LnyWa?dl=0

For manuscripts utilizing custom algorithms or software that are central to the research but not yet described in published literature, software must be made available to editors/reviewers upon request. We strongly encourage code deposition in a community repository (e.g. GitHub). See the Nature Research guidelines for submitting code & software for further information.
Data

Policy information about availability of data
All manuscripts must include a data availability statement. This statement should provide the following information, where applicable:
- Accession codes, unique identifiers, or web links for publicly available datasets
- A list of figures that have associated raw data
- A description of any restrictions on data availability

All raw and processed data used to generate figures and representative images presented in this paper are available at the following url: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/b2mv4o9wmzicq7v/AABARZsKtD1TQKMseoG_LnyWa7dl=0.

Field-specific reporting

Please select the best fit for your research. If you are not sure, read the appropriate sections before making your selection.

☒ Life sciences
☐ Behavioural & social sciences
☐ Ecological, evolutionary & environmental sciences

For a reference copy of the document with all sections, see nature.com/authors/policies/ReportingSummary-flat.pdf

Life sciences study design

All studies must disclose on these points even when the disclosure is negative.

| Sample size          | No sample-size calculation was performed. Sample sizes were selected by screening thousands of RNAs per experiment across many cells in a minimum of 2 independent experiments to show a fair distribution of the patterns observed |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Data exclusions      | No data were excluded from the analysis because all attempts at replication were successful.                                                                                                           |
| Replication          | All attempts at replication were successful. Each result in this manuscript has a minimum of 2 independent experiments.                                                                                   |
| Randomization        | Samples were allocated into experimental groups based on individual treatments performed.                                                                                                               |
| Blinding             | Blinding was not relevant to this study                                                                                                                                                                |

Reporting for specific materials, systems and methods

| Materials & experimental systems | Methods |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| n/a                             | n/a     |
| ☒ Involved in the study         | Involved in the study |
| ☒ Unique biological materials   | ☒ ChIP-seq |
| ☒ Antibodies                    | ☒ Flow cytometry |
| ☒ Eukaryotic cell lines         | ☒ MRI-based neuroimaging |
| ☒ Palaeontology                 |         |
| ☒ Animals and other organisms   |         |
| ☒ Human research participants   |         |

Eukaryotic cell lines

Policy information about cell lines

Cell line source(s) | WM983b cells-Gift from Meenhard Herlyn's lab at the Wistar Institute
                    | MDA-MB-231 cells-ATCC
                    | HeLa cells-ATCC

Authentication | Short tandem repeat DNA profiling

Mycoplasma contamination | All cell lines tested negative for mycoplasma contamination.
Commonly misidentified lines (See ICLAC register)

No commonly misidentified cell lines were used in this study.

Animals and other organisms

Policy information about studies involving animals: ARRIVE guidelines recommended for reporting animal research

| Laboratory animals | Kidneys were harvested from 4 day old, male C57BL/6i mice |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Wild animals       | No wild animals were used in this study.                  |
| Field-collected samples | This study did not involve field-collected samples.       |

Flow Cytometry

Plots

- The axis labels state the marker and fluorochrome used (e.g. CD4-FITC).
- The axis scales are clearly visible. Include numbers along axes only for bottom left plot of group (a 'group' is an analysis of identical markers).
- All plots are contour plots with outliers or pseudocolor plots.
- A numerical value for number of cells or percentage (with statistics) is provided.

Methodology

Sample preparation

ClampFISH for flow cytometry was performed as described above however the cells were kept in suspension. Wash buffer and 2X SSC were supplemented with 0.25% Triton-X, and the clampFISH hybridization buffer was supplemented with the following blocking reagents: 1μg/μl yeast tRNA (Invitrogen), 0.02% w/v bovine serum albumin, 100ng/μl sonicated salmon sperm DNA (Agilent).

Instrument

FACSjazz (BD Biosciences)

Software

FlowJo

Cell population abundance

For separating based on GFP mRNA expression, we used the expression of GFP protein to determine abundance of each population.

Gating strategy

For separating based on GFP mRNA expression, we used the expression of GFP protein to gate GFP positive and negative cells. For gating endogenous targets, we used samples that were treated with clampFISH amplifiers, but no primary probe to define the negative cells and determine where positive signal began. We then gated and sorted the upper 10% and lower 10% of the populations.

Tick this box to confirm that a figure exemplifying the gating strategy is provided in the Supplementary Information.