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# Detecting rare and faint signals via thresholding maximum likelihood estimators

## Abstract

Motivated by the analysis of RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) data for genes differentially expressed across multiple conditions, we consider detecting rare and faint signals in high-dimensional response variables. We address the signal detection problem under a general framework, which includes generalized linear models for count-valued responses as special cases. We propose a test statistic that carries out a multi-level thresholding on maximum likelihood estimators (MLEs) of the signals, based on a new Cramér-type moderate deviation result for multidimensional MLEs. Based on the multi-level thresholding test, a multiple testing procedure is proposed for signal identification. Numerical simulations and a case study on maize RNA-seq data are conducted to demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed approaches on signal detection and identification.

## Keywords

Detection boundary, false discovery proportion, generalized linear model, moderate deviation, multiple testing procedure, RNA-seq data

## Disciplines

Genetics and Genomics | Statistical Models | Statistical Theory

## Comments

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## DETECTING RARE AND FAINT SIGNALS VIA THRESHOLDING MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD ESTIMATORS<sup>1</sup>

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Motivated by the analysis of RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) data for genes differentially expressed across multiple conditions, we consider detecting rare and faint signals in high-dimensional response variables. We address the signal detection problem under a general framework, which includes generalized linear models for count-valued responses as special cases. We propose a test statistic that carries out a multi-level thresholding on maximum likelihood estimators (MLEs) of the signals, based on a new Cramér-type moderate deviation result for multidimensional MLEs. Based on the multi-level thresholding test, a multiple testing procedure is proposed for signal identification. Numerical simulations and a case study on maize RNA-seq data are conducted to demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed approaches on signal detection and identification.

**1. Introduction.** With the advance of technology, high-dimensional data are becoming increasingly common in scientific studies ranging from bioinformatics, signal processing and astrophysics. An important task in these studies is to detect rare and faint signals leading to scientific discovery. The goal of signal detection is to determine the existence of signals in the parameters of interest based on noisy data. If any signal is detected, identifying the subset of parameters carrying the signal becomes important. Suppose each observation consists of a high-dimensional response vector and a low-dimensional vector of explanatory variables which can represent treatment regimes and covariate information. In this paper, we intend to detect and identify signals defined, in general, by an association between the explanatory vector and the high-dimensional response.

A primary motivation for our work is analyzing data from Next Generation Sequencing of RNA (RNA-seq), which provides information about transcript abundance for each gene. When there are two or more treatments, we are interested in detecting whether any of the genes are differentially expressed across treatments. Unlike continuous microarray data, RNA-seq data are usually collected in the form

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of counts that are associated with expression levels of genetic features. Generalized linear models (GLMs) and their extensions are often used to model such data; see, for example, [Robinson and Smyth \(2007, 2008\)](#), [Anders and Huber \(2010\)](#) and [Lund et al. \(2012\)](#).

In this paper, we first consider testing sparse and faint covariate effects among all the responses variables, which includes testing regression coefficients in GLMs as a special case. This amounts to testing whether certain linear combinations of parameters are nonzero when the deviations of the linear combinations from zero (signals) are small in magnitude (faintness of signal) and occur in few dimensions (rareness of signals). We consider the high-dimensional paradigm where the number of the response variables is much larger than the number of replications. Due to high dimensionality and rareness and faintness of signals, we carry out thresholding on maximum likelihood estimates (MLEs) of the signals in each dimension to remove nonsignal bearing dimensions. A thresholding test statistic is constructed by summing the thresholded signal MLEs over all the response dimensions based on a newly established Cramér-type moderate deviation result for the MLEs. We propose a multi-level thresholding test statistic constructed by maximizing the standardized thresholding statistic over a set of thresholds. This provides a data-driven strategy for automated threshold selection that produces an attractive detection boundary for testing rare and faint signals. Built on the promise of the multi-level thresholding tests, we propose a procedure for identifying the signal-bearing dimensions.

For testing rare and faint signals in means, [Donoho and Jin \(2004\)](#) showed that the Higher Criticism (HC) test can attain the optimal detection boundary [[Ingster \(1997\)](#)] for uncorrelated Gaussian random vectors; see [Delaigle, Hall and Jin \(2011\)](#), [Hall and Jin \(2008, 2010\)](#) and [Zhong, Chen and Xu \(2013\)](#) for further studies and extensions. Testing for high dimensional means is advantageous because estimators for the means (i.e., sample means) are readily available, as well as the large deviation results for the sample means needed for the analysis of HC statistics. For testing the regression coefficients in GLMs, the study becomes more challenging. Although MLEs for the regression coefficients can be obtained, we need moderate deviation results for MLEs to uncover the performance of the proposed thresholding statistics. The new moderate deviation result with specific error rates allows us to analyze the properties of the proposed test. There is work for GLMs with univariate response but high-dimensional covariates, which includes [Fan and Song \(2010\)](#) for Sure Independent Screening of covariates, and [Zhong and Chen \(2011\)](#), [Goeman et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Guo and Chen \(2016\)](#) for testing high-dimensional regression coefficients. Statistical inference for data with sparse and faint signals has been also considered in the areas of high-dimensional linear regression and classification; see, for example, [Arias-Castro, Candès and Plan \(2011\)](#), [Ji and Jin \(2012\)](#) and [Fan, Jin and Yao \(2013\)](#). We address a different problem where covariates are low dimensional but responses are high dimensional, reflecting the situation of RNA-seq data.

The paper is organized as follows. The models and hypothesis of interest are introduced in Section 2. Section 3 presents thresholding for MLEs together with the moderate deviation result. The multi-level thresholding test is proposed in Section 4, where the powers of both the single- and multiple-level thresholding tests are investigated. Signal identification is discussed in Section 5. Simulation results and an analysis of maize RNA-seq data are presented in Sections 6 and 7, respectively. Section 8 provides extensions of the proposed methods. Technical details are given in both the Appendix and the Supplementary Material [Qiu, Chen and Nettleton (2018)].

**2. Models and hypotheses.** Suppose  $p$  response variables are measured for  $n$  experimental units. Let  $y_{ij}$  be the measurement of response  $j$  for experimental unit  $i$  ( $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ ). Let  $z_i = (z_{i1}, \dots, z_{im})'$  be a vector of fixed and known explanatory variable values for experimental unit  $i$ , and let  $\beta_j = (\beta_{j1}, \dots, \beta_{jm})'$  be parameters representing explanatory variable effects and  $\phi_j$  be an ancillary parameter for response  $j$ . Let  $f_j(y; z_i, \theta_j)$  be the density function of  $y_{ij}$ , where  $\theta_j = (\beta_j', \phi_j)'$ .

We are interested in testing, for a known matrix  $D_{d \times m}$ ,

$$(2.1) \quad H_0: D\beta_j = 0 \quad \text{for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \quad H_a: D\beta_j \neq 0 \quad \text{for some } j.$$

The matrix  $D$  is determined by the context of an application that would lead to a specific model parameterization and the hypothesis of interest in terms of model parameters. Each row of the matrix  $D$  contains coefficients of a linear combination of the parameters. Under the null hypothesis, the  $d$  linear combinations of regression coefficients determined by  $D$  are all zero for all  $j$ . Hypothesis (2.1) is a general setup, which includes testing for main effects of factors and interactions among factors as special cases. For example, in the case of testing the equivalence of two sample means where  $\beta_j = (\beta_{j1}, \beta_{j2})'$  stands for the population means of the two groups,  $D$  may be chosen as  $(1, -1)$ . As another example, consider the test for interaction in a 2-by-2 factorial design, where  $\beta_j = (\beta_{j,11}, \beta_{j,12}, \beta_{j,21}, \beta_{j,22})'$  is the vector of treatment means corresponding to the four combinations of factor levels. Then  $D$  may be  $(1, -1, -1, 1)$  to specify the null hypothesis of no interaction.

We consider a setting of (2.1) which facilitates the study of test performance for the challenging case of sparse and weak signals. Let  $\beta_{j,0}$  be the value of  $\beta_j$  under the null hypothesis. Suppose that under  $H_a$ ,  $\beta_j$  takes the value  $\beta_{j,0}$  with probability  $1 - \varepsilon$  and takes the value  $\beta_{j,0} + \beta_{j,a}$  with probability  $\varepsilon$  for an  $\varepsilon > 0$ . This means only  $\varepsilon$  proportion of the responses are expected to carry signal under the alternative with signal strength  $\beta_{j,a}$ . This leads to a specific form of the hypotheses in (2.1):

$$(2.2) \quad \begin{aligned} H_0: \beta_j &= \beta_{j,0} && \text{such that } D\beta_{j,0} = 0 \text{ for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_a: \beta_j &\stackrel{\text{ind}}{\sim} (1 - \varepsilon)v_{\beta_{j,0}} + \varepsilon v_{\beta_{j,0} + \beta_{j,a}} && \text{for all } j, \end{aligned}$$

where  $\nu_\beta$  stands for the point mass distribution at  $\beta$ ,  $\varepsilon = p^{-\kappa}$  for  $\kappa \in (0, 1)$ , and  $\beta_{j,a} = r_j \sqrt{2(\log p)/n}$  for an  $m$ -dimensional vector  $r_j \in (0, 1)^m$ . Here,  $\kappa$  and  $\{r_j\}$  specify the sparsity and the signal strengths, respectively. The signal strengths  $\{r_j\}$  are assumed to be independently drawn from a super population compactly supported on a set  $\mathcal{G}$  where  $P(Dr_j \neq 0) = 1$ .

Note that (2.2) is a specialized version of (2.1), which has been used to evaluate high-dimensional test procedures in the literature, for instance [Donoho and Jin \(2004\)](#) and [Hall and Jin \(2010\)](#). Although the method we develop is for testing the hypotheses in (2.1), it is important to understand its performance for testing (2.2), which offers the most challenging setting for signal detection in high dimension. The challenge is reflected in two aspects: the sparsity and faintness of signals under  $H_a$  in (2.2). Good performance for testing (2.2) implies good performance for testing (2.1) and is important in a variety of applications, including the empirical study of RNA-seq data in Section 7, where important biological signals could be both rare and faint. Thus, we construct a test that is powerful under (2.2) and also directly applicable in the general settings of (2.1).

A relevant special case of (2.2) is when only one component of  $\beta_j$  is of interest, say  $\beta_{jk}$  for some  $k \in \{1, \dots, m\}$ . Let  $\beta_{jk,a}$  be the  $k$ th element of  $\beta_{j,a}$ . The corresponding hypotheses under consideration are

$$(2.3) \quad H_0 : \beta_{jk} = 0 \quad \text{for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \quad H_a : \beta_{jk} \sim (1 - \varepsilon)\nu_0 + \varepsilon\nu_{\beta_{jk,a}}.$$

Testing for treatment effects under GLMs is a special case of the above framework, where the distribution of  $y_{ij}$  is within the exponential family with mean  $\mu_{ij}$  and dispersion parameter  $\phi_j$ . The relationship between  $\mu_{ij}$  and  $\beta_j$  is modeled as  $g(\mu_{ij}) = z'_i \beta_j$  via a link function  $g(\cdot)$ . The following are some specific models.

*Linear regression.* The mean  $\mu_{ij}$  of the response is linearly related to the covariates  $z_i$  as  $y_{ij} = z'_i \beta_j + \varepsilon_{ij}$  for i.i.d. error  $\varepsilon_{ij} \sim N(0, \sigma_j^2)$  ( $\phi_j = \sigma_j^2$ ).

*Binomial regression.* Suppose  $y_{ij}$  follows a binomial distribution with parameters  $n_{ij}$  and  $p_{ij}$ , where  $p_{ij} = E(y_{ij}/n_{ij})$  is the expected success proportion. With the logistic link, the relationship between  $p_{ij}$  and  $z_i$  is prescribed as  $p_{ij} = \exp(z'_i \beta_j) / \{\exp(z'_i \beta_j) + 1\}$ , and  $\phi_j = 1$ .

*Poisson regression.* The dependence of  $\mu_{ij} = E(y_{ij})$  on the covariates  $z_i$  is usually assumed to be  $\log(\mu_{ij}) = z'_i \beta_j$ . Under the Poisson model, the dispersion parameter is a constant (i.e.,  $\phi_j = 1$ ).

*Negative binomial regression.* Real data, such as RNA-seq data, often show evidence of over-dispersion, where the variance of the response is larger than its mean. The negative binomial distribution provides a way to account for over-dispersion because its variance increases quadratically as the mean increases:  $\text{Var}(y_{ij}) = \mu_{ij} + \mu_{ij}^2 / \phi_j$ . We consider the log link  $\log(\mu_{ij}) = z'_i \beta_j$ , and assume that the dispersion parameter  $\phi_j$  is unknown and may change from one response variable to another.

**3. Thresholding MLEs.** In this section, we construct a thresholding test for the hypothesis (2.1). We have already explained that  $z_i$  are fixed and known. For the  $j$ th response variable, define

$$I_{\theta,j}(\theta_j) = -\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n E \left\{ \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \theta_j \partial \theta_j'} \log f_j(y_{ij}; z_i, \theta_j) \right\}$$

to be the average Fisher information of  $\theta_j$ , where  $\theta_j = (\beta_j', \phi_j)'$ . Let  $\hat{\theta}_j = (\hat{\beta}_j', \hat{\phi}_j)'$  and  $\theta_j^0 = (\beta_j^{0'}, \phi_j^0)'$  be the MLE and the true value of  $\theta_j$ , respectively, where  $\hat{\beta}_j = (\hat{\beta}_{j1}, \dots, \hat{\beta}_{jm})'$ . As each  $\theta_j^0$  is low dimensional,  $\hat{\theta}_j$  can be readily obtained for each dimension. Let  $\hat{I}_{\theta,j} = I_{\theta,j}(\hat{\theta}_j)$  be the estimated average Fisher information matrix of  $\theta_j$ . Let  $I_j^{-1}(\theta_j)$  and  $\hat{I}_j^{-1} = I_j^{-1}(\hat{\theta}_j)$  be the true and estimated inverse average Fisher information matrix corresponding to  $\beta_j$ , which are the upper-left  $m \times m$  blocks of  $I_{\theta,j}^{-1}(\theta_j)$  and  $\hat{I}_{\theta,j}^{-1}$ , respectively. Because there are no treatment effects on most of the responses under a sparse alternative, we apply thresholding on the estimated treatment effects for each response. Let  $|\cdot|$ ,  $\|\cdot\|$  and  $\mathbf{I}(\cdot)$  be the Euclidean norm for vectors, the Frobenius norm for matrices and the indicator function, respectively.

To formulate the thresholding procedure, we need to first establish a moderate deviation result for MLEs of nonidentically distributed data, which requires the following two assumptions.

A1. Suppose  $\Theta$  is a compact subset of  $\mathbf{R}^{m+1}$ , and  $\theta_j^0 \in \text{int } \Theta$ . There exist non-negative measurable functions  $H_{ij}(\cdot, z_i)$  and  $G_{ij}(\cdot, z_i)$ , such that for any  $y$  in the support of  $y_{ij}$ :

- (i)  $|\log f_j(y; z_i, \theta_1) - \log f_j(y; z_i, \theta_2)| \leq H_{ij}(y, z_i)|\theta_1 - \theta_2|$  for any  $\theta_1, \theta_2 \in \Theta$  and  $\limsup n^{-1} \sum_{i=1}^n EH_{ij}(y_{ij}, z_i) \leq H_j < \infty$  for  $H_j > 0$ ;
- (ii) there exists a constant  $\delta_0 > 0$  such that for  $\theta_1 \in \Theta$  and  $|\theta_1 - \theta_j^0| < \delta_0$ ,

$$\left\| \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \theta \partial \theta'} \log f_j(y; z_i, \theta_1) - \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \theta \partial \theta'} \log f_j(y; z_i, \theta_j^0) \right\| \leq G_{ij}(y, z_i)|\theta_1 - \theta_j^0|$$

and  $\limsup n^{-1} \sum_{i=1}^n EG_{ij}(y_{ij}, z_i) \leq G_j < \infty$  for  $G_j > 0$ .

A2. There exists a constant  $\delta > 0$  such that  $E[\exp\{\delta|\frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} \log f_j(y_{ij}; z_i, \theta_j^0)\}|]$ ,  $E[\exp\{\delta\|\frac{\partial^2}{\partial \theta \partial \theta'} \log f_j(y_{ij}; z_i, \theta_j^0)\}|]$  and  $E[\exp\{\delta G_{ij}(y_{ij}, z_i)\}]$  are finite.

Assumption A1 prescribes the Lipschitz condition, which is commonly assumed for likelihood inference [Jensen and Wood (1998); van der Vaart (1998)]. The existence of the moment generating function in A2 is a necessary condition for the Cramér-type moderate deviation results [Petrov (1995); Saulis and Statulevičius (1991)]. We verify in the Supplementary Material [Qiu, Chen and Nettleton (2018)] that these conditions are satisfied for the models discussed in Section 2.

LEMMA 1. *Suppose Assumptions A1 and A2 are satisfied for all  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ . Then:*

(i) *for  $w_n = o(n^{1/6})$  and  $w_n > \sqrt{(2C_0)^{-1} \log n}$ ,*

$$P(|\hat{I}_{\theta,j}^{1/2}(\hat{\theta}_j - \theta_j^0)| \geq w_n/\sqrt{n}) = P(|\mathcal{N}_{m+1}| \geq w_n)\{1 + O(w_n^3/\sqrt{n})\},$$

*where  $\mathcal{N}_{m+1} \sim N(0, I_{m+1})$  and  $C_0 > 1$  is a large positive constant;*

(ii) *for  $w_n = O(\sqrt{n})$  and some positive constants  $C$  and  $M$ ,*

$$P(|\hat{I}_{\theta,j}^{1/2}(\hat{\theta}_j - \theta_j^0)| \geq w_n/\sqrt{n}) \leq C \exp(-w_n^2/M).$$

Lemma 1(i) provides the Cramér-type moderate deviation result for MLEs from independent but not identically distributed data with estimated Fisher information matrix. It shows that the tail of standardized MLEs can be well approximated by the tail of standard normal distribution. Lemma 1(ii) provides an exponential bound for the tail probability of MLEs. These results suggest that the threshold level for standardized MLEs is  $\sqrt{2s \log p}$  for  $s \in (0, 1)$ .

Lemma 1 holds for i.i.d. data with more concise conditions. For the i.i.d. case, Inglot and Kallenberg (2003) obtained results for the moderate deviation of an MLE  $\hat{\theta}$  under model mis-specification, where the amount of mis-specification converges to 0 as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ . They showed that

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} w_n^{-2} \log\{P(\sqrt{n}|I_\theta^{1/2}(\hat{\theta} - \theta^0)| \geq w_n)\} = -1/2$$

for  $w_n = o(n^{1/2})$ , where  $I_\theta$  is the Fisher information of  $\theta$ . However, such a result is not enough for the analysis of the thresholding approach. The error rate  $w_n^3/\sqrt{n}$  in Lemma 1 is needed to facilitate the analysis for this paper.

We are now ready to define, for an  $s \in (0, 1)$ , a thresholding test statistic for hypothesis (2.1) as

$$(3.1) \quad T_n(s) = \sum_{j=1}^p n(D\hat{\beta}_j)' \hat{V}_j^{-1}(D\hat{\beta}_j) \mathbf{I}(|\hat{V}_j^{-1/2} D\hat{\beta}_j| > \sqrt{(2s \log p)/n}),$$

where  $\hat{V}_j/n = D\hat{I}_j^{-1}D'/n$  is the estimated variance of the estimated signals,  $D\hat{\beta}_j$ . Let  $e_k$  be the  $m$ -dimensional unit vector with the  $k$ th element being 1 and all others being 0. The thresholding test statistics for hypothesis (2.3) can be obtained from (3.1) by setting  $D = e'_k$ , which leads to

$$T_{n,k}(s) = \sum_{j=1}^p n\hat{J}_{j,kk}^{-1}\hat{\beta}_{jk}^2 \mathbf{I}(|\hat{J}_{j,kk}^{-1/2}\hat{\beta}_{jk}| \geq \sqrt{(2s \log p)/n}),$$

where  $\hat{J}_{j,kk}$  is the  $k$ th diagonal element of  $\hat{J}_j = \hat{I}_j^{-1}$ .

Thresholding approaches have been applied on sample means in the HC test [Donoho and Jin (2004)] for testing high-dimensional means. The properties of



thresholding on general MLEs are more challenging due to the diverse form of the parameters and less knowledge of moderate deviation results.

To derive the variance of  $T_n(s)$ , we need to introduce the notion of  $\rho$ -mixing. Let  $Y_i = (y_{i1}, \dots, y_{ip})'$  for  $i = 1, \dots, n$ , and  $\mathcal{F}_a^b(Y_i) = \sigma\{y_{ij} : a \leq j \leq b\}$  be the  $\sigma$ -field generated by  $Y_i$  for  $-\infty \leq a \leq b \leq \infty$ . Define the  $\rho$ -mixing coefficients [Bradley (2005)] of the sequence  $\{y_{ij}\}_{j=1}^p$  as  $\rho_i(k) = \sup_{m \in \mathbb{Z}} \rho\{\mathcal{F}_{-\infty}^m(Y_i), \mathcal{F}_{m+k}^\infty(Y_i)\}$ , where for two  $\sigma$ -algebras  $\mathcal{A}$  and  $\mathcal{B}$

$$\rho(\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{B}) = \sup\{|\text{Corr}(f, g)| : f \in \mathcal{L}^2(\mathcal{A}), g \in \mathcal{L}^2(\mathcal{B})\},$$

where  $\text{Corr}(\cdot, \cdot)$  denotes the correlation operator and  $\mathcal{L}^2(\mathcal{A})$  is the collection of random variables on  $\mathcal{A}$  with finite second moment. The following assumption prescribes the dependence among  $\{y_{ij}\}_{j=1}^p$ .

A3. The sequences of response variables  $\{y_{ij}\}_{j=1}^p$  are  $\rho$ -mixing, and the mixing coefficients satisfy  $\rho_i(k) \leq C\alpha^k$  for a constant  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$ , any positive integer  $k$  and  $i = 1, \dots, n$ .

Because the thresholding statistic  $T_n(s)$  in (3.1) involves summation over  $p$  response variables, we only require that A3 holds for some permutation of the response variables, but we do not need to know the permutation.

Let  $\lambda_p(s) = 2s \log p$ , and  $\bar{F}_d(\cdot)$  and  $f_d(\cdot)$  be the survival and the density functions of a chi-square random variable with  $d$  degrees of freedom, respectively. Define

$$\begin{aligned} \mu_0(s) &= pd\bar{F}_{d+2}(\lambda_p(s)) \quad \text{and} \\ \sigma_0^2(s) &= pd(d+2)\bar{F}_{d+4}(\lambda_p(s)) - pd^2\bar{F}_{d+2}^2(\lambda_p(s)). \end{aligned} \tag{3.2}$$

Based on Lemma 1 and the  $\rho$ -mixing condition, we have the following theorem giving the mean, variance and the limiting distribution of  $T_n(s)$ .

THEOREM 1. Under  $H_0$ , A1, A2, A3 and  $\log p = o(n^{1/3})$ ,

$$E\{T_n(s)|H_0\} = \mu_0(s)\{1 + O(\lambda_p(s)^{3/2}/\sqrt{n})\},$$

$$\text{Var}\{T_n(s)|H_0\} = \sigma_0^2(s)\{1 + o(1)\}$$

for any  $s \in (0, 1)$  and

$$\frac{T_n(s) - E\{T_n(s)|H_0\}}{\sqrt{\text{Var}\{T_n(s)|H_0\}}} \xrightarrow{d} N(0, 1) \quad \text{as } n, p \rightarrow \infty. \tag{3.3}$$

To formulate a testing procedure,  $E\{T_n(s)|H_0\}$  and  $\text{Var}\{T_n(s)|H_0\}$  can be estimated by their main orders  $\mu_0(s)$  and  $\sigma_0^2(s)$ , respectively. By Slutsky's theorem,  $\{T_n(s) - \mu_0(s)\}/\sigma_0(s)$  converges in distribution to  $N(0, 1)$  if  $E\{T_n(s)|H_0\} - \mu_0(s) = o\{\sigma_0(s)\}$ . The latter is satisfied if  $n \sim p^\xi$  for a  $\xi \in (0, 1)$  and  $s > 1 - \xi$  as stated in the following corollary.

**COROLLARY 1.** Under  $H_0$ , A1, A2, A3 and  $n \sim p^\xi$  for a  $\xi \in (0, 1)$ ,  $\{T_n(s) - \mu_0(s)\}/\sigma_0(s) \xrightarrow{d} N(0, 1)$  for  $s > 1 - \xi$  as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ .

As both  $\mu_0(s)$  and  $\sigma_0(s)$  are known, a single-level thresholding test rejects  $H_0$  in (2.1) at significance level  $\alpha$  if  $T_n(s) - \mu_0(s) > z_\alpha \sigma_0(s)$ , where  $z_\alpha$  is the upper  $\alpha$  quantile of  $N(0, 1)$ . The restrictions  $n \sim p^\xi$  and  $s > 1 - \xi$  can be removed if we employ an estimator  $\hat{\mu}(s)$  that satisfies

$$(3.4) \quad \sigma_0^{-1}(s)[E\{T_n(s)|H_0\} - \hat{\mu}(s)] = o(1).$$

Such an estimator may be constructed by utilizing the specific distributional information of the GLM in conjunction with bias correction. It can be shown that under the linear model with Gaussian errors,  $\mu_0(s) = E\{T_n(s)|H_0\}$  which satisfies the condition (3.4). Implications of using different forms of  $\hat{\mu}(s)$  on the proposed multi-level thresholding test will be discussed after Theorem 2 in the next section.

**4. Multi-level thresholding test.** Single-level thresholding is known [Donoho and Jin (2004)] to be incapable in testing sparse and faint signals in (2.2) and (2.3) with unknown signal strength and sparsity. To adapt to the unknown signal strength and sparsity, we propose a multi-level thresholding procedure that considers multiple thresholding levels  $s \in (0, 1)$ . This avoids the issue of threshold selection encountered in the single-level thresholding case. To simplify our exposition, the main results in this section are presented under (3.4); extensions without (3.4) are also discussed.

Donoho and Jin (2004) considered testing the high-dimensional mean of a standard normally distributed random vector. They studied the setting

$$(4.1) \quad \begin{aligned} H_0 : \mu_j &= 0 \quad \text{for } j = 1, \dots, p \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_a : \mu_1, \dots, \mu_p &\stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} (1 - \varepsilon)v_0 + \varepsilon v_{\mu_a} \end{aligned}$$

for  $\varepsilon = p^{-\kappa}$ ,  $\mu_a = r\sqrt{2(\log p)/n}$ ,  $\kappa \in (0, 1)$  and  $r \in (0, 1)$ . Ingster (1997) showed that

$$(4.2) \quad \text{DB}(\kappa) = \begin{cases} \max\{0, \kappa - 1/2\} & \text{if } 0 < \kappa \leq 3/4, \\ (1 - \sqrt{1 - \kappa})^2 & \text{if } 3/4 < \kappa < 1, \end{cases}$$

is the optimal detection boundary for testing (4.1) for standard normally distributed data. This means that for any test of hypothesis (4.1),

$$(4.3) \quad \text{Type I Error} + \text{Type II Error} \rightarrow 1 \quad \text{if } r^2 < \text{DB}(\kappa)$$

as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ . And, there exists an optimal test such that,

$$(4.4) \quad \text{Type I Error} + \text{Type II Error} \rightarrow 0 \quad \text{if } r^2 > \text{DB}(\kappa)$$

as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ . Donoho and Jin (2004) showed that their HC test attains the optimal detection boundary for independent normal data with unit variance.

We need knowledge about the power of the single-level thresholding test before presenting the multi-level thresholding test. Let

$$(4.5) \quad \Delta_n(s) = \frac{E(T_n(s)|H_a) - E(T_n(s)|H_0)}{\sqrt{\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_a)}}$$

be the signal to noise ratio. Given a nominal level  $\alpha$  and  $H_a$  in (2.2), the power of the single-level thresholding test is

$$\text{Power}_n(s; \alpha) = P\left(\frac{T_n(s) - E(T_n(s)|H_a)}{\sqrt{\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_a)}} > z_\alpha \sqrt{\frac{\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_0)}{\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_a)}} - \Delta_n(s) \mid H_a\right).$$

It can be shown that  $\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_0)/\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_a)$  is between 0 and 1, and  $[T_n(s) - E(T_n(s)|H_a)]/\sqrt{\text{Var}(T_n(s)|H_a)}$  is stochastically bounded. To ensure the power converges to 1,  $\Delta_n(s)$  has to diverge to  $\infty$  as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ . Hence,  $\Delta_n(s)$  is a key power determinant, which depends on the sparsity  $\kappa$  and the signal strengths in  $\{r_j\}$ .

To make the test adaptive to the unknown sparsity and the signal strength, we consider a test based on multiple threshold levels in the spirit of the HC test of Donoho and Jin (2004) and its  $L_2$  version proposed by Zhong, Chen and Xu (2013). Let

$$\hat{T}_n(s) = \frac{T_n(s) - \hat{\mu}(s)}{\sigma_0(s)},$$

where  $\hat{\mu}(s)$ , as conveyed in Section 3, is an estimate of  $E\{T_n(s)|H_0\}$  that satisfies (3.4). The strategy is to maximize  $\hat{T}_n(s)$  over multiple threshold levels. Let

$$\mathcal{S}_n(\omega) = \{s_j : s_j = n(D\hat{\beta}_j)' \hat{V}_j^{-1} (D\hat{\beta}_j) / (2 \log p) \text{ and } s_j \leq 1 - \omega, 1 \leq j \leq p\}$$

for a small positive constant  $\omega$ . The multi-level thresholding statistic is

$$(4.6) \quad \mathcal{T}_n = \max_{s \in \mathcal{S}_n(\omega)} \hat{T}_n(s).$$

The following theorem states the asymptotic null distribution of  $\mathcal{T}_n$ .

**THEOREM 2.** Under  $H_0$  in (2.1), A1, A2, A3, (3.4) and  $\log p = o(n^{1/3})$ , for any  $x \in \mathbb{R}$  and  $\omega \in (0, 1)$ ,

$$P(a_p \mathcal{T}_n - b_p(\omega) \leq x) \rightarrow \exp\{-\exp(-x)\} \quad \text{as } n \rightarrow \infty,$$

where  $a_p = \{2 \log(\log(p))\}^{1/2}$  and

$$b_p(\omega) = 2 \log(\log(p)) + 2^{-1} \log(\log(\log(p))) + \log(1 - \omega) - 2^{-1} \log(4\pi).$$

Based on Theorem 2, a level  $\alpha$  multi-level thresholding test rejects  $H_0$  in (2.1) if  $\mathcal{T}_n > a_p^{-1}(g_\alpha + b_p(\omega))$ , where  $g_\alpha$  is the upper  $\alpha$  quantile of the Gumbel distribution  $\exp\{-\exp(-x)\}$ . We choose  $\omega$  small to obtain good power for the proposed test.

In practice, we may choose  $\hat{\mu}(s) = \mu_0(s)$  in the formulation of  $\mathcal{T}_n$ . In the case that  $\mu_0(s)$  does not satisfy (3.4), we have to (i) restrict the relationship between  $n$  and  $p$  such that  $n \sim p^\xi$  for a  $\xi \in (0, 1)$ ; (ii) modify the multi-level thresholding statistic by restricting  $\mathcal{S}_n(\omega)$  such that  $s_j > 1 - \xi$  for all  $j$  and choosing  $\omega$  small enough such that  $\omega < \xi$ . It can be shown that Theorem 2 is still valid with  $b_p(\omega)$  replaced by  $b_p(1 + \omega - \xi)$ . In this case, the multi-level thresholding test rejects  $H_0$  in (2.1) if  $\mathcal{T}_n > a_p^{-1}(g_\alpha + b_p(1 + \omega - \xi))$ .

To study the power of the proposed test against the sparse and weak hypothesis in (2.2), we consider a general setting which allows the response distributions, parameters and signal strength to vary across dimensions. In the following, we use  $c_0$  to denote a small positive constant.

B1. There are  $H$  (a positive integer) possible families of distributions for the responses. Specifically, a  $\tau_h \geq c_0$  proportion out of the total  $p$  responses are distributed according to a distribution family with density  $f_{(h)}(y_{ij}; z_i, \theta_j)$  that satisfies Assumptions A1 and A2 for  $h = 1, \dots, H$ .

B2. The parameters under  $H_0$ ,  $\{(\beta'_{j,0}, \phi'_j)'\}_{j=1}^p$ , are i.i.d. copies from an  $(m + 1)$ -dimensional super population with a density function  $q_1$  which is compactly supported on a set  $\mathcal{K} \subset \mathbf{R}^{m+1}$  such that  $q_1(\theta) \geq c_0$  and  $D\beta = 0$  for any  $\theta = (\beta', \phi)' \in \mathcal{K}$ .

B3. The signal strengths in  $\{r_j\}$  are independently drawn from a super population with a density function  $q_2$ , which is compactly supported on a set  $\mathcal{G}$ , where  $Dr \neq 0$  and  $q_2(r) \geq c_0$  for any  $r \in \mathcal{G}$ .

Let  $I_{\theta,h,\infty}(\cdot) = -\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \mathbf{E} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \theta \partial \theta'} \log f_{(h)}(y_{ij}; z_i, \cdot)$ . Let  $I_{h,\infty}^{-1}(\theta)$  be the upper  $m \times m$  block of  $I_{\theta,h,\infty}^{-1}(\theta)$ . Suppose the  $j$ th response is from the  $h_j$ th family of distributions. Define the standardized signal strength

$$(4.7) \quad \tilde{r}_{h_j}(r_j, \theta_j) = r'_j D' V_{h_j,\infty}^{-1}(\theta_j) D r_j,$$

where  $V_{h_j,\infty}(\theta_j) = D I_{h_j,\infty}^{-1}(\theta_j) D'$ , and for  $\mathcal{H} = \{1, \dots, H\}$ , let

$$(4.8) \quad \tilde{r} = \max_{h \in \mathcal{H}, r \in \mathcal{G}, \theta \in \mathcal{K}} \tilde{r}_h(r, \theta)$$

be the maximal standardized signal strength. Unlike the setting of the means in (4.1), where the signal strength is solely determined by  $r$ , both  $\tilde{r}_{h_j}(r_j, \theta_j)$  and  $\tilde{r}$  depend on both  $r_j$  and  $\theta_j$ .

As we will demonstrate shortly, the power of the multi-level thresholding test is critically determined by  $\tilde{r}$ . Although it may seem strange for an  $L_2$ -type test's power to depend on the maximal signal strength, this connection with  $\tilde{r}$  is due to the thresholding step we have augmented to the  $L_2$  formulation to make the procedure adaptive to weak and faint signals. It should be noted that this maximal signal is not "isolated." Indeed, under the alternative hypothesis of (2.2), due to the compact support and bounded density [ $q_1(\theta) \geq c_0$  and  $q_2(r) \geq c_0$ ] conditions

in B1–B3, there will be a  $c_{\varepsilon'} > 0$  proportion of the signal-bearing responses with signal strength larger than  $\tilde{r} - \varepsilon'$  for any small  $\varepsilon' > 0$ . This cluster of the responses around  $\tilde{r}$  determines the power of the proposed test as revealed in the following theorem.

**THEOREM 3.** *Under  $H_a$  in (2.2), A1–A3, B1–B3, (3.4),  $\log p = o(n^{1/3})$  and  $\omega$  small enough, for a series of slowly varying type I error rates converging to 0 as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ , with probability approaching 1:*

- (i) *if  $\tilde{r} < \text{DB}(\kappa)$ , the power of the multi-level thresholding test  $\rightarrow 0$ ;*
- (ii) *if  $\tilde{r} > \text{DB}(\kappa)$ , the power of the multi-level thresholding test  $\rightarrow 1$ .*

The theorem indicates that  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$  is the detection boundary of the multi-level thresholding test. This detection boundary cannot be achieved by the standard  $L_2$  tests, for instance that in [Chen and Qin \(2010\)](#), due to the lack of a thresholding component to screen out dimensions bearing no signal. Thresholding retains the most informative part of the signal while removing the noninformative dimensions.

The optimality of the detection boundary  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$  can be established when we confine to the linear regression with normally distributed response. Consider the linear regression model, for  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ ,

$$(4.9) \quad y_{ij} = z'_i \beta_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad \text{for } \varepsilon_{ij} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} N(0, \sigma^2).$$

Under this model,  $\tilde{r} = \max_{r \in \mathcal{G}} \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} r' D' \{D(Z'Z)^{-1} D'\}^{-1} D r / (n\sigma^2)$  for  $Z = (z_1, \dots, z_n)'$ .

**THEOREM 4.** *Assume the responses for each observation are independent. For the hypothesis (2.2), under B2, B3 and the linear model (4.9), if  $\tilde{r} < \text{DB}(\kappa)$ , Type I Error + Type II Error  $\rightarrow 1$  for any test as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ .*

Theorem 4 shows that  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$  is the detection lower boundary of any test for the hypothesis (2.2) under the linear model (4.9) and independence among responses. From Theorem 3, we see that the proposed test obtains the optimal detection boundary under the conditions of Theorem 4. Although the assumption of independent responses is used here for deriving the optimal detection boundary and showing the optimality of the proposed test, the proposed test is still valid without the independence assumption (see A3). We would also like to point out that the optimal detection boundary under the case of dependent responses could be lower than the one given in Theorem 4, as discovered in [Hall and Jin \(2010\)](#) for testing high-dimensional means. We believe that the optimality under this dependent case could be achieved by the proposed test by implementing a data transformation first.

[Arias-Castro, Candès and Plan \(2011\)](#) showed that  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$  is the optimal detection boundary for the linear regression model with high-dimensional covariates

but low-dimensional (univariate) response. The model we consider in (4.9) has low-dimensional covariates but high-dimensional responses.

For non-Gaussian distributions that satisfy A1 and A2, the following Theorem 5 indicates that  $DB(\kappa)$  is a detection lower boundary in the sense of (4.3). To formulate the statement, we define a new quantity  $r_0$  that reflects the discrepancy between  $\beta_j$  and 0. Recall that  $f_{h_j}(y_{ij}; z_i, \theta_j)$  is the density of the  $j$ th response and  $\beta_{j,a} = r_j \sqrt{2(\log p)/n}$  for  $r_j \in \mathcal{G}$ . Let

$$\begin{aligned}
 I_{\beta,h_j,\infty}(\cdot) &= - \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \sum_{i=1}^n E \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \beta \partial \beta'} \log f_{h_j}(y_{ij}; z_i, \cdot) / n \quad \text{and} \\
 (4.10) \quad r_0 &= \max_{h \in \mathcal{H}, r \in \mathcal{G}, \theta \in \mathcal{K}} r' I_{\beta,h,\infty}(\theta) r.
 \end{aligned}$$

Note that  $\tilde{r}$  measures the signal strength of the targeting linear combinations  $D\beta_j$ , while  $r_0$  is the squared standardized distance of  $r_j$  from 0. The latter may involve nuisance parameters, which are not of our interest. Since  $D$  has full row rank, and  $I_{\beta,h,\infty}(\theta)$  and  $I_{h,\infty}^{-1}(\theta)$  are the upper  $m \times m$  sub-matrices of  $I_{\theta,h,\infty}(\theta)$  and  $I_{\theta,h,\infty}^{-1}(\theta)$ , respectively, it can be shown that  $r_0 \geq \tilde{r}$  under any distribution of the response.

**THEOREM 5.** *Assume the responses for each observation are independent. Under A1, A2, and B1–B3, for the hypothesis (2.2), if  $r_0 < DB(\kappa)$ , Type I Error + Type II Error  $\rightarrow 1$  for any test as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ .*

Since  $r_0 \geq \tilde{r}$ , the undetectable region  $r_0 < DB(\kappa)$  given in Theorem 5 for any distribution is smaller than that given in Theorem 4 written in terms of  $\tilde{r}$ , which is specifically for the linear model (4.9). When the dispersion parameter  $\phi_j$  is known and  $D$  is the identity matrix, we have  $I_{\beta,h,\infty}(\theta) = I_{h,\infty}(\theta)$  and  $r_0 = \tilde{r}$ . Under this form of the simple null hypothesis, it can be shown that the multi-level thresholding test attains the detection lower boundary. Hence, it is optimal under this scenario. However, for a general composite hypothesis (2.2), the proposed test may not attain this lower detection boundary written in terms of  $r_0$ , since there may not exist a simple hypothesis equivalent to (2.2) under the non-Gaussian case.

**5. Signal identification.** If hypothesis (2.1) is rejected, we are interested in locating the dimensions of signals. This is equivalent to considering

$$(5.1) \quad H_{j,0} : D\beta_j = 0 \quad \text{vs.} \quad H_{j,a} : D\beta_j \neq 0,$$

for  $j = 1, \dots, p$ , and identifying the dimensions with  $D\beta_j \neq 0$ . Let  $p_0$  be the number of true null hypotheses. For sparse signals,  $p_0$  is close to  $p$ . Let  $V$  and  $R$  be the numbers of false positives and rejected null hypotheses, respectively. The false discovery proportion  $FDP = V / \max\{R, 1\}$  is the proportion of falsely rejected

null hypotheses among all rejected null hypotheses, and the false discovery rate (FDR) is the expectation of the FDP.

Benjamini and Hochberg (1995) (BH) considered FDR control at a level  $\alpha \in (0, 1)$  for (5.1) under dimension-wise independence. For each dimension  $j$ , let  $p_j = P(\chi_d^2 > n(D\hat{\beta}_j)' \hat{V}_j^{-1}(D\hat{\beta}_j))$  be the  $p$ -value for testing  $H_{j,0}$  based on the Wald test, where  $\chi_d^2$  denotes the chi-square distribution with  $d$  degrees of freedom. Let  $p_{(1)} \leq p_{(2)} \leq \dots \leq p_{(p)}$  be the ordered  $p$ -values, and  $\pi(j)$  be the dimension label of the  $j$ th smallest  $p$ -value. BH's procedure rejects  $H_{\pi(1),0}, \dots, H_{\pi(M),0}$  in (5.1) for  $M = \max\{j : p_{(j)} \leq \alpha j/p\}$ .

Controlling FDR bounds the expected FDP over repeated experiments. Genovese and Wasserman (2006) suggested controlling the probability that FDP exceeds a specific value, that is, to control  $P(\text{FDP} > c) \leq \alpha$  for a given  $c$  in  $(0, 1)$ , For each subset  $W \subset \{1, \dots, p\}$ , they considered testing

$$(5.2) \quad \begin{aligned} H_{W,0} : D\beta_l &= 0 && \text{for all } l \in W \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_{W,a} : D\beta_l &\neq 0 && \text{for some } l \in W \end{aligned}$$

at level  $\alpha$ . Let  $\mathcal{U}$  be the collection of all subsets  $W$  not rejected in (5.2). For any subset  $A \subset \{1, \dots, p\}$ , they define  $\bar{\Gamma}(A) = \max_{B \in \mathcal{U}} \frac{\#(B \cap A)}{\#(A)}$  to be a  $1 - \alpha$  confidence envelope for FDP, where  $\#(A)$  is the cardinality of  $A$ . Then choose the rejection set  $R_0$  such that  $\bar{\Gamma}(R_0) \leq c$  to control the FDP exceedance rate. Genovese and Wasserman (2006) proposed to test the overall hypothesis (5.2) via the minimum  $p$ -value test (GW1). Extensions to tests based on the  $k$ th smallest  $p$ -value and an approach to combine results from different  $k$  (GWcom) were proposed. See Sections 4 and 6 of Genovese and Wasserman (2006) for details.

Testing all the subsets of  $\{1, \dots, p\}$  is computational infeasible when  $p$  is large. Most importantly, by linking the results given in Donoho and Jin (2004) and Theorem 3, the test based on the minimum  $p$ -value cannot attain the optimal detection boundary  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$ . To translate the good detection property of the multi-level thresholding test to better signal detection, we apply the proposed test for the overall hypotheses (5.2) in a step-down formulation. Specifically, let  $W_j = \{\pi(j), \pi(j + 1), \dots, \pi(p)\}$  for  $j = 1, \dots, p$ . Consider testing at level  $\alpha$  the hypothesis

$$(5.3) \quad \begin{aligned} H_{W_j,0} : D\beta_l &= 0 && \text{for all } l \in W_j \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_{W_j,a} : D\beta_l &\neq 0 && \text{for some } l \in W_j. \end{aligned}$$

The sequence of the tests in (5.3) serves as a step-down procedure for (5.1).

Let  $\mathcal{T}(W_j)$  be the multi-level thresholding statistic computed using data in  $W_j$ . The following is the proposed multiple testing procedure for (5.1):

- (i) Step-down: define  $J = \min\{j : \mathcal{T}(W_j) \leq a_{p-j+1}^{-1}(g_\alpha + b_{p-j+1}(\omega))\}$  or  $p + 1$  if  $\mathcal{T}(W_j) > a_{p-j+1}^{-1}(g_\alpha + b_{p-j+1}(\omega))$  for all  $j = 1, \dots, p$ . Let  $R_1 = \{\pi(1), \dots, \pi(J - 1)\}$  or the empty set if  $J = 1$ .

(ii) Augmentation: let  $J^* = \min\{p, \lfloor (J - 1)/(1 - c) \rfloor\}$ ,  $R^* = \{\pi(1), \dots, \pi(J^*)\}$  or the empty set if  $J^* = 0$ .

(iii) Rejection set: our proposed procedure rejects the null hypothesis in (5.1) for all  $j$  in  $R^*$ .

Part (i) is a step-down procedure via the thresholding statistic (4.6) for the hypotheses (5.3). Essentially,  $J$  is obtained by repeatedly conducting the multi-level thresholding test on  $W_j$  while removing the most significant individual dimension one at a time until there is no rejection. Part (ii) is the augmentation step. Following Genovese and Wasserman (2006), the rejection set  $R^*$  is obtained by augmenting  $R_1$  from part (i) with the next  $\lfloor (J - 1)c/(1 - c) \rfloor$  most significant dimensions whenever  $R_1$  is nonempty.

The rationale for enlarging  $R_1$  is that if we only choose  $R_1$  as the set of signals, the FDP rate would diminish to zero with probability  $1 - \alpha$  as the number of signals increases with  $n$  and  $p$ . Augmenting the rejection set with the next  $\lfloor (J - 1)c/(1 - c) \rfloor$  most significant dimensions increases power while still asymptotically controlling the rate of FDP exceeding  $c$  at level  $\alpha$ .

Comparing to the BH procedure that only controls average FDP, our procedure can control a more stringent type I error rate without power loss. Comparing to the GW procedure, since the multi-level thresholding test is more powerful than the minimum  $p$ -value test in detecting rare and faint signals as confirmed in Figure 3, the proposed signal identification procedure enjoys higher power than the GW procedure. We will demonstrate those advantages of the proposed procedure by the following two theorems.

Let  $S = R - V$  be the number of correctly discovered signals (true positives), and let  $S_{GW}$ ,  $S_{BH}$  and  $S_{prop}$  be  $S$  for the GW, BH and the proposed procedures, respectively. Recall that  $p - p_0$  is the total number of signals. The following theorem compares the ratios of signal selection of the proposed procedure with that of the GW and BH procedures. To simplify the presentation, we assume the standardized signal strength  $\tilde{r}_{h_j}(r_j, \theta_j)$  in (4.7) is the same for all the responses in the following theorems.

**THEOREM 6.** Under  $H_a$  in (2.2) with  $\tilde{r} > \kappa$ , Conditions A1–A3 and  $\log p = o(n^{1/3})$ , as  $\alpha \rightarrow 0$  slowly and  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ :

- (i)  $S_{GW}/(p - p_0) \xrightarrow{p} 0$  when  $\tilde{r} < 1$ ;
- (ii)  $S_{GW}/(p - p_0) \xrightarrow{p} 1$  at the rate  $p^{-(\sqrt{\tilde{r}} - \sqrt{\kappa})^2 + o(1)}$  when  $\tilde{r} > 1$ ;
- (iii)  $S_{prop}/(p - p_0)$  and  $S_{BH}/(p - p_0)$  converge to 1 in probability at the rate  $p^{-(\sqrt{\tilde{r}} - \sqrt{\kappa})^2 + o(1)}$ .

Theorem 6 shows that the signal identification by employing the proposed approach and the BH procedure is selection consistent as long as  $\tilde{r} > \kappa$ , whereas the GW procedure is selection consistent only for the strong signal case of  $\tilde{r} > 1$ . It



is noted that  $\tilde{r} > \kappa$  is a minimum requirement for identifying rare and faint signal since Ji and Jin (2012) discovered that the signal identification is impossible if  $\tilde{r} < \kappa$ . When the signal strength is stronger such that  $\tilde{r} > 1$ , all the three procedures attain the signal selection consistency with the same rate of convergence up to a factor of  $p^{o(1)}$ . While Theorem 6 shows that the true positive rates of the proposed procedure is comparable to that of the BH procedure, the following theorem shows that the proposed procedure can control the FDP exceedance rate, which is more stringent than the FDR control achieved by the BH procedure.

**THEOREM 7.** *Under  $H_a$  in (2.2) with  $\tilde{r} > \kappa$ , Conditions A1–A3 and  $\log p = o(n^{1/3})$ , as  $n, p \rightarrow \infty$ , the proposed multiple testing procedure controls the FDP exceedance rate such that  $P(\text{FDP} > c) \leq \alpha$ .*

It is noted that the FDR based procedure (BH method) controls the average of FDP without considering its variation. Hence, it may not be suitable in some applications as pointed out by Genovese and Wasserman (2006). The proposed procedure provides a method for incorporating FDP variability under control without sacrificing the power in terms of signal selection consistency. Simulation studies reported in the next section confirm that the proposed procedure can control both FDR and the exceedance FDP rate, and outperform both the BH and GW procedures.

**6. Simulation study.** We studied the empirical performance of the proposed test under generalized linear models. Balanced designs with two treatments were considered. To mimic the “large  $p$ , small  $n$ ” paradigm, we chose the total sample size  $n = 20$  and  $40$ , where the sub-sample sizes of each treatment group are  $10$  and  $20$ , respectively. The dimension was chosen as  $p = 100, 400, 1000$  and  $10,000$ . Three models were used to simulate data. In each model, the covariate vectors ( $z_i$ ) take values  $(1, 0)'$  or  $(0, 1)'$ , indicating the first and second treatment, respectively. The models are as follows:

- Poisson regression. For  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ , the response  $y_{ij}$  follows Poisson distribution with mean  $\mu_{ij} = \exp(z_i' \beta_j)$ .
- Binomial regression. Suppose  $y_{ij} \sim \text{binomial}(n_{ij}, p_{ij})$ , where  $n_{ij}$  were randomly chosen from the integers between  $20$  and  $40$  according to a discrete uniform distribution, and  $p_{ij} = \exp(z_i' \beta_j) / \{\exp(z_i' \beta_j) + 1\}$ .
- Negative binomial regression. The response  $y_{ij}$  is generated from  $\text{NB}(\mu_{ij}, \phi_j)$  with  $\log(\mu_{ij}) = z_i' \beta_j$ , where the dispersion parameters  $\phi_1, \dots, \phi_p$  were set according to i.i.d. draws from the uniform(3, 13) distribution.

We tested whether there are treatment effects for any of the response variables. Namely, with the  $D$  matrix in (2.2) equal to  $(1, -1)$ , we have

$$(6.1) \quad H_0 : \beta_{j1} = \beta_{j2} \quad \text{for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \quad H_a : \beta_{j2} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} (1 - \varepsilon)v_{\beta_{j1}} + \varepsilon v_{\beta_{j1} + \beta_a},$$

where  $\varepsilon = p^{-\kappa}$  and  $\beta_a = \sqrt{(2r_a \log p)/n}$ . Under  $H_0$ ,  $\beta_{j1} = \beta_{j2} = \beta_0$  for all response variables, where  $\beta_0 = 2$  for Poisson regression, 2.5 for negative binomial regression and 0.5 for binomial regression.

We chose  $\kappa = 0.6$  and  $0.55$  representing the sparsity of signals. The numbers of signals were kept at 7, 11, 16 and 40 corresponding to  $p = 100, 400, 1000$  and  $10,000$  for  $\kappa = 0.6$ , and 8, 15, 22 and 63 corresponding to  $p = 100, 400, 1000$  and  $10,000$  for  $\kappa = 0.55$ , respectively. The strength parameter  $r_a$  was chosen differently between different models to make the standardized signal strength within  $(0, 1)$ . We estimated  $E\{T_n(s)|H_0\}$  by its main order  $\mu_0(s)$  given in (3.2), and set  $\omega = 0.1$ . The nominal size was 5%. All the simulation results reported below are based on 1000 replications.

For negative binomial regression, the MLE  $\hat{\phi}_j$  usually overestimates  $\phi_j$  when the sample size is small, leading to under-estimation of the standard deviation of  $\hat{\beta}_j$ . This enlarges the thresholding statistic and causes a size distortion. We use a parametric bootstrap to correct the bias of  $\hat{\phi}_j$ . Specifically, for each response variable, the MLEs  $\hat{\beta}_j$  and  $\hat{\phi}_j$  are first obtained based on the original sample. Bootstrap resamples of size  $n$  are drawn from the negative binomial model with parameters  $\hat{\beta}_j$  and  $\hat{\phi}_j$ , and  $\phi_j$  is re-estimated based on the resample. The process is repeated  $B$  times to obtain the bootstrapped MLEs  $\hat{\phi}_{j,1}^*, \dots, \hat{\phi}_{j,B}^*$ . The bias corrected estimator is  $\tilde{\phi}_j = 2\hat{\phi}_j - \bar{\phi}_j^*$ , where  $\bar{\phi}_j^* = \sum_{i=1}^B \hat{\phi}_{j,i}^* / B$ . We use  $\tilde{\phi}_j$  to approximate the Fisher information of  $\beta_j$  and to compute the thresholding statistics  $T_n(s)$  in (3.1).

The empirical size and power of the multi-level thresholding test are displayed in Figure 1. We observe that the proposed test had reasonable size around the nominal level 5% in most cases. The sizes for Poisson and negative binomial regression were slightly conservative under  $n = 20$ . When  $n$  was increased to 40, the sizes increased to around 5%. The powers of the proposed test were satisfactory under all the scenarios and increased rapidly with the increase of signal strength and number of signals. There were dips in the power between the fourth and fifth index, which were due to the decrease in the signal strength  $r_a$  that was not compensated by the increase in the number of signals. The simulation setting provides one example where fewer large signals are easier to detect than many small signals.

To better understand the different performances of the proposed test under the three models, we provide in Table 1 the value of  $r_a$  that defines  $\beta_a = \sqrt{(2r_a \log p)/n}$  and the corresponding maximal standardized signal strength  $\tilde{r}$  in (4.8). It shows that the negative binomial regression has the highest  $\tilde{r}$  among the three models, which is due to the fact that the  $r_a$  for the negative binomial regression is larger than those in the Poisson and binomial regression. Having the largest  $\tilde{r}$  is the reason why the empirical power was higher for negative binomial regression than for Poisson or binomial regression. It is observed that the empirical power is not very responsive to the changing sample size, but is sensitive to the dimensionality  $p$ . This is because, as shown in Proposition S1 in the Supplementary Material [Qiu, Chen and Nettleton (2018)], the signal to noise ratio (SNR) of the

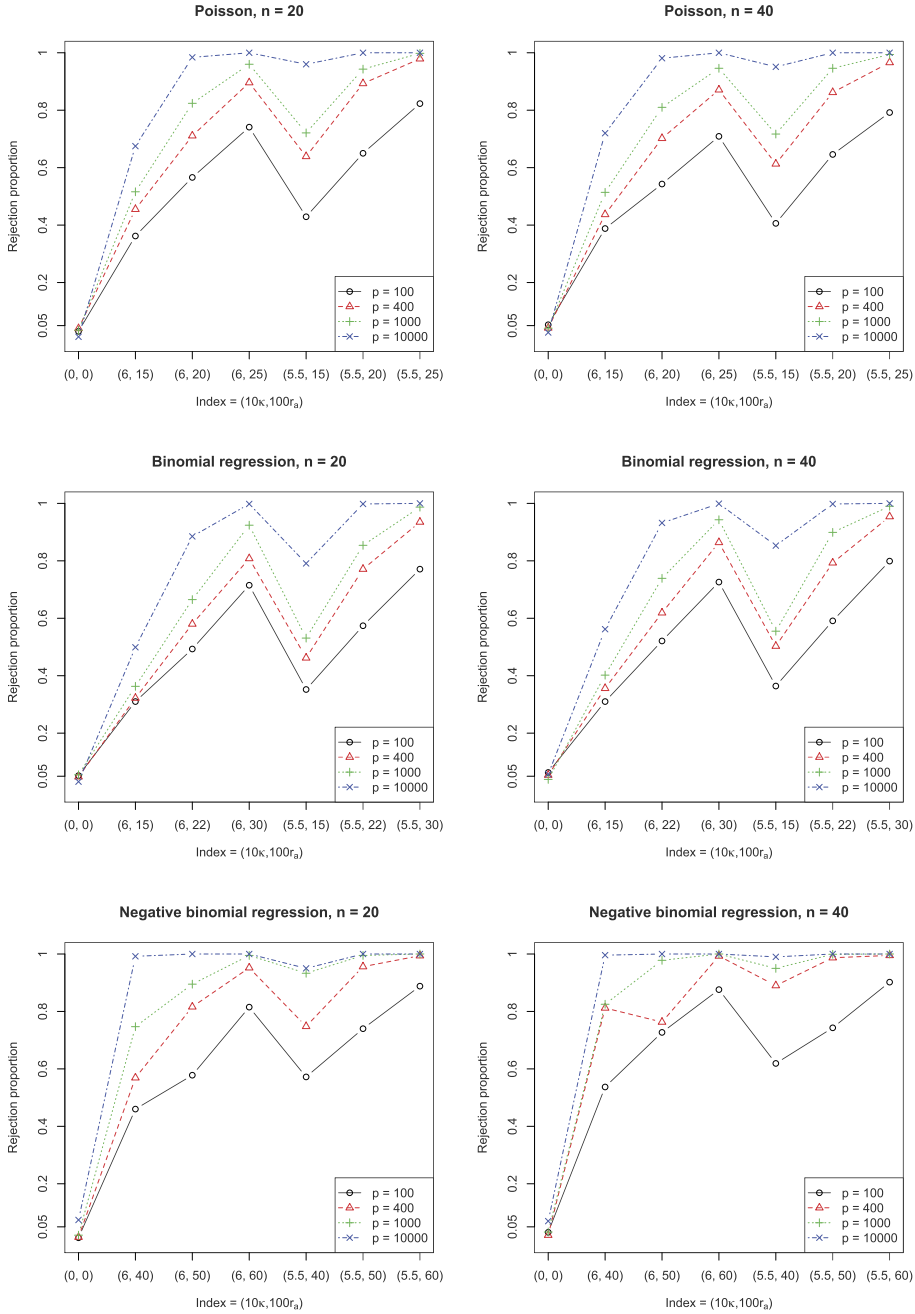


FIG. 1. Empirical sizes and powers of the multi-level thresholding test for the hypothesis (6.1) under Poisson, binomial and negative binomial regression. The vertical axis shows the proportion of rejections. The horizontal axis gives the null hypothesis, represented by (0, 0), and six alternative hypotheses. The first and second index of the horizontal axis give the values of  $10\kappa$  and  $100r_a$ , respectively, providing signal sparsity and strength.

TABLE 1  
*The maximal standardized signal strength  $\tilde{r}$  at different  $r_a$  for the three models*

Poisson $\beta = (2, 2)'$		Binomial $\beta = (0.5, 0.5)'$		Negative binomial $\beta = (2.5, 2.5)'$	
$r_a$	$\tilde{r}$	$r_a$	$\tilde{r}$	$r_a$	$\tilde{r}$
0.15	0.28	0.15	0.29	0.4	0.63
0.2	0.37	0.22	0.42	0.5	0.78
0.25	0.46	0.3	0.59	0.6	0.94

thresholding test is largely determined by  $p, \kappa$  and  $\tilde{r}$ . And the SNR increases as  $p$  increases as long as  $\tilde{r} > \text{DB}(\kappa)$ .

In addition to (6.1), we also considered scenarios motivated by the experiment described in Section 7. That experiment involves a Latin square design with two blocking factors (lanes and barcodes) and one treatment factor of interest (genotype). Suppose for  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ ,

$$g(\mu_{ij}) = v_j + X'_{g,i}\alpha_j + X'_{\ell,i}\tau_j + X'_{b,i}\gamma_j,$$

where  $g(\cdot)$  is a link function,  $v_j$  is an intercept parameter,  $X_{g,i}, X_{\ell,i}$  and  $X_{b,i}$  are vectors that indicates the genotype, lane and barcode of the  $i$ th experimental unit, respectively, and  $\alpha_j = (\alpha_{j1}, \alpha_{j2}, \alpha_{j3}, \alpha_{j4})', \tau_j = (\tau_{j1}, \tau_{j2}, \tau_{j3}, \tau_{j4})'$  and  $\gamma_j = (\gamma_{j1}, \gamma_{j2}, \gamma_{j3}, \gamma_{j4})'$  are vectors of genotype, lane and barcode effects, respectively. As discussed in Section 7, we are interested in testing the hypothesis  $H_0 : \alpha_{j1} = \alpha_{j2} = \alpha_{j3} = 0$  for all  $j$ , where  $\alpha_{j4}$  is set to zero for identifiability purposes. Recall that  $I_3$  is the  $3 \times 3$  identity matrix. The  $D$  matrix in (2.2) that corresponds to this hypothesis is  $[0_{3 \times 1}, I_3, 0_{3 \times 3}, 0_{3 \times 3}]$ .

We consider Poisson, negative binomial and binomial regression with  $n = 16$  (to match the sample size in the case study) and also  $n = 32$ , which doubles the number of observations for each combination of factors. The link function  $g(\cdot)$  was set to log for Poisson and negative binomial cases and to logit for binomial regression. We set  $v_j = 3.5, 2, 0.2$  for Poisson, negative binomial and binomial regression, respectively. We set  $\tau_j = \gamma_j = (-0.5, 0, 0.5, 0)'$  for Poisson and negative binomial regression, and  $\tau_j = \gamma_j = (-0.1, 0, 0.1, 0)'$  for binomial regression. In all our simulations,  $\alpha_{j1}, \alpha_{j2}$  and  $\alpha_{j3}$  were set to a common value denoted as  $\alpha_{j0}$ . Under the null,  $\alpha_{j0}$  was set to 0, and under the alternative,  $\alpha_{j0}$  was generated according to

$$(6.2) \quad H_a : \alpha_{j0} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} (1 - \varepsilon)v_0 + \varepsilon v_{\alpha_a},$$

where  $\alpha_a = \sqrt{(2r_a \log p)/n}$ . The simulation results, reported in Figure 2, show that the multi-level thresholding test had reasonable size and good power for detecting the alternative in (6.2). This shows that the proposed method works well

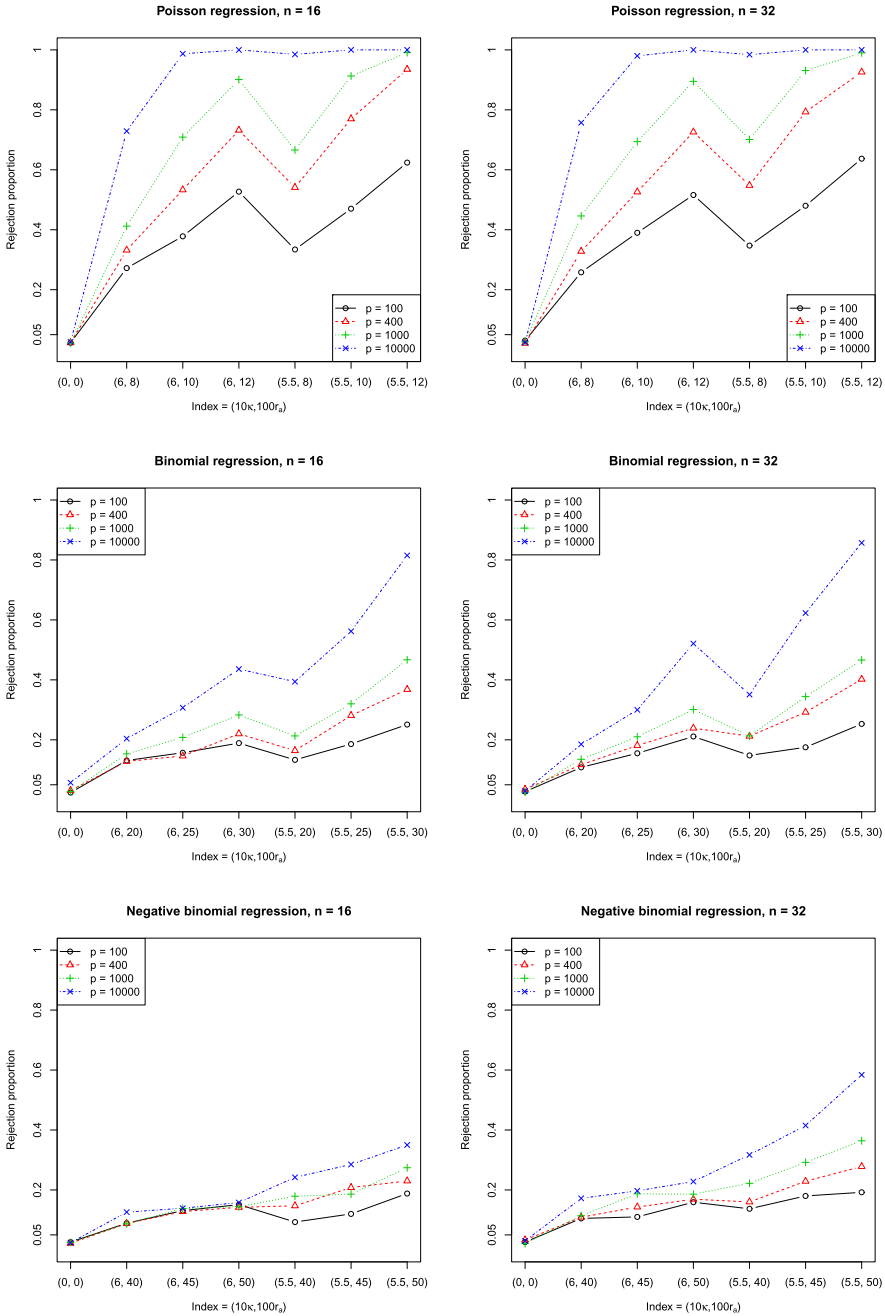


FIG. 2. Empirical sizes and powers of the multi-level thresholding test for the hypothesis (6.2) under Poisson, binomial and negative binomial regression. The vertical axis shows the proportion of rejections. The horizontal axis gives the null hypothesis, represented by (0, 0), and six alternative hypotheses. The first and second index of the horizontal axis give the values of  $10\kappa$  and  $100r_a$ , respectively, providing signal sparsity and strength.

for designed experiments more complex than the two-group comparisons covered in our other simulation scenarios.

To gain wider perspectives on our proposal, we compared the proposed test with two alternative formulations. One was a HC test in the spirit of [Donoho and Jin \(2004\)](#), which rejects  $H_0$  in (6.1) if  $HC^* > \sqrt{2 \log \log p}$  where

$$HC^* = \max_{1 \leq j \leq p/2} \sqrt{p} [j/p - p_{(j)}] / [p_{(j)}(1 - p_{(j)})]^{1/2}.$$

The other was a test based on the minimum  $p$ -value, which reject  $H_0$  in (6.1) if  $p_{(1)} < B_{1,p}^{-1}(0.05) \approx 0.05/p$ . This is equivalent to the test based on the max-norm statistics over all dimensions. We considered 30 and 40 signals. Figure 3 displays the powers of the three tests for Poisson regression with  $p = 400$  and 1000. The results for other models and dimensions were similar. To make the power comparison fair, all the empirical sizes were adjusted to be 5%. It is observed that the proposed test had the best power among the three test procedures, and the power of the minimum  $p$ -value test was the lowest. In the context of testing for means, [Donoho and Jin \(2004\)](#) showed that the minimum  $p$ -value test is powerless for  $\kappa \in (1/2, 3/4)$  and  $\kappa - 1/2 < \tilde{r} < (1 - \sqrt{1 - \kappa})^2$ , a region that lies above the optimal detection boundary of the proposed test. Similar detection boundary results for the minimum  $p$ -value test can be derived under our context, so the poorer power performance in our simulation is not surprising. The superior performance of the proposed test over the HC formulation suggests that the advantage of the  $L_2$  formulation after thresholding as discovered in [Zhong, Chen and Xu \(2013\)](#) for the mean parameter may be valid for general MLEs.

To compare the proposed multiple testing procedure with the procedures of [Benjamini and Hochberg \(1995\)](#) (BH) and [Genovese and Wasserman \(2006\)](#), we considered negative binomial regression under  $H_a$  in (6.1) with  $\beta_{j1} = 2.5$ ,  $n = 40$ ,  $p = 10,000$  and 4 different numbers of signals, 50, 100, 150 and 200. We adopt the GW procedure with  $k = 1$  (GW1) and the combined  $k$  approach (GWcom), and set the FDP exceedance level  $c = 0.1$  and the control rate  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Figure 4 shows the type I and type II errors of the four procedures. We see that the proposed procedure controlled the FDR and the exceedance FDP rate around 5% for all the cases. The BH procedure (which is designed to control FDR) was unable to control the exceedance FDP rate when the number of signals is 50. The nondiscovery proportions of the proposed procedure were close to those of the BH procedure. However, the proposed procedure was more powerful when the signal strength is weak ( $r_a = 0.8$ ). Although both the GW procedures controlled the exceedance FDP rate, they were too conservative. Their type I error rates were around 0, which inevitably brought large type II errors.

**7. Case study.** In this section we illustrate the proposed method in an analysis of maize RNA-seq data from [Paschold et al. \(2017\)](#). In an RNA-seq experiment, target mRNA molecules are first converted to cDNA fragments that are

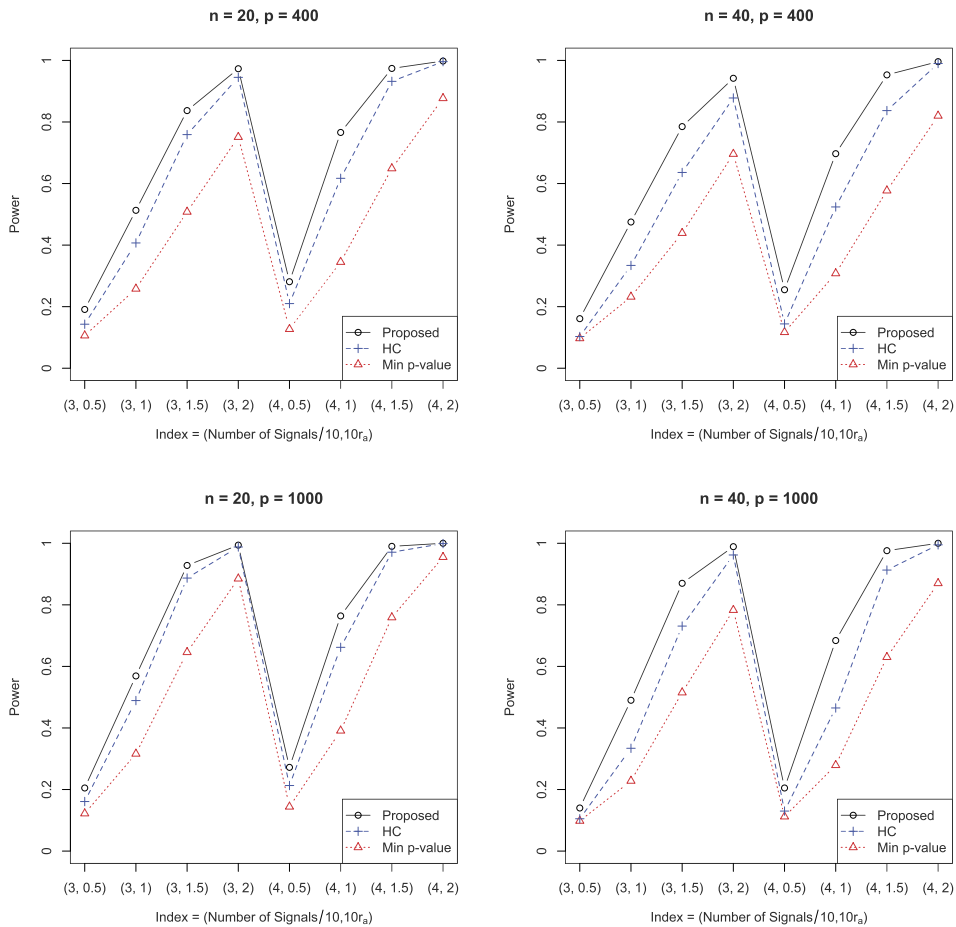


FIG. 3. Power comparison between the multi-level thresholding test, HC test and minimum  $p$ -value test. The vertical axis gives the empirical powers of the three tests for hypothesis (6.1) under Poisson regression and  $p = 400, 1000$ . The first and second index of the horizontal axis give one tenth of the number of signals and  $10r_a$ , respectively.

sequenced on a high-throughput next generation sequencing platform. Then these sequences (known as reads) are aligned to a reference genome, and the number of reads mapped to a given gene measures its expression level. The data set we analyze consists of RNA-seq read counts from root cortex tissue of four maize genotypes with four replications per genotype. The four genotypes include two inbred parental lines (labeled B and M) as well as two hybrid genotypes formed by crossing B and M with B as the female parent and M as the male parent (BM) and vice versus (MB). Although these two reciprocal hybrids are genotypically indistinguishable, they may differ in some traits, including gene expression levels.

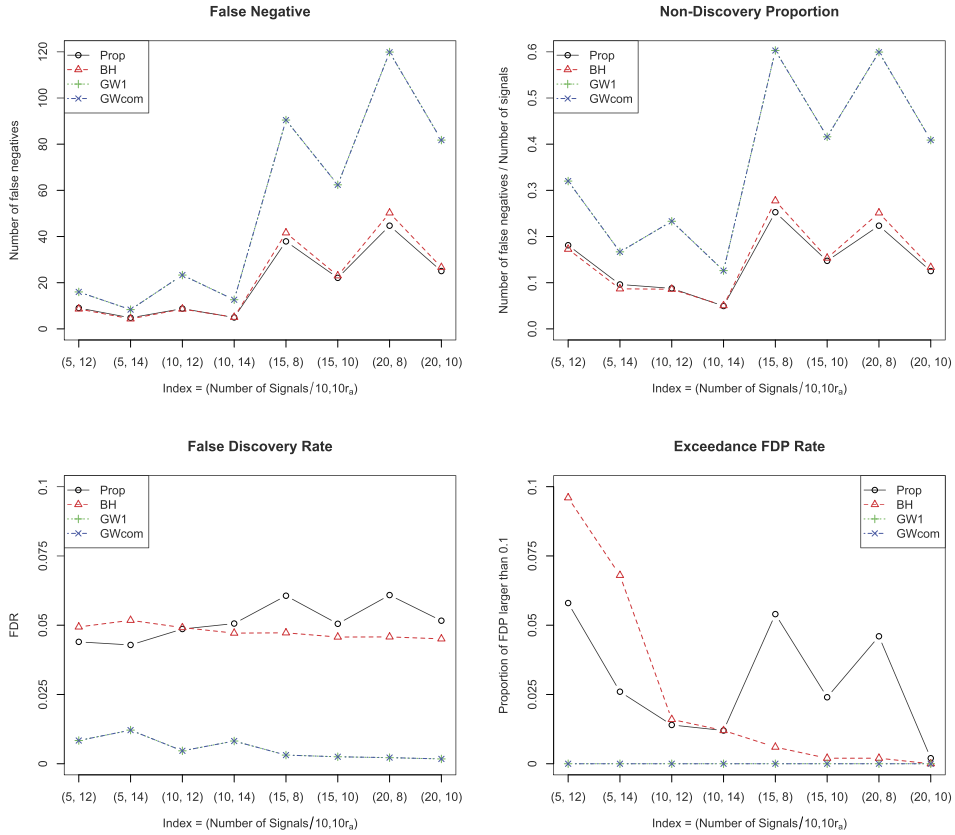


FIG. 4. Averages of the number of false negatives (type II errors), the nondiscovery proportion (number of false negatives/number of signals), FDR and the proportion of FDP in excess of 0.1 for the proposed multiple testing procedure, BH procedure and GW procedures with  $k = 1$  and the combined  $k$  approach for the negative binomial regression under  $H_a$  in (6.1) with  $\beta_{j1} = 2.5$ ,  $n = 40$  and  $p = 10,000$ . The first and second index of the horizontal axis give one tenth of the number of signals and  $10r_a$ , respectively.

The four samples from any given block were sequenced together in a single Illumina flow cell lane. Four barcodes (AR001, AR003, AR008 and AR009) were used so that each read could be attributed to the correct sample within each lane. Table 2 illustrates the Latin square sequencing design employed to facilitate estimation of block/lane, barcode and genotype effects on gene expression levels.

Consistent with standard practice in the analysis of RNA-seq data, we applied pre-screening to delete the genes with low read counts (average counts less than 10). For the  $j$ th gene included in the analysis, let  $y_{1j}, \dots, y_{16j}$  be the RNA-seq read counts. We assume  $y_{ij}$  follows a negative binomial distribution with dispersion parameter  $\phi_j$  and mean  $\mu_{ij}$  satisfying

$$\log(\mu_{ij}) = v_j + X'_{g,i}\alpha_j + X'_{\ell,i}\tau_j + X'_{b,i}\gamma_j,$$



TABLE 2  
*The Latin square sequencing design for the maize study*

	Barcode			
	AR001	AR003	AR008	AR009
Block/lane 1	B	M	BM	MB
Block/lane 2	M	BM	MB	B
Block/lane 3	BM	MB	B	M
Block/lane 4	MB	B	M	BM

where  $v_j$  is an intercept parameter and  $\alpha_j = (\alpha_{j1}, \alpha_{j2}, \alpha_{j3}, \alpha_{j4})'$ ,  $\tau_j = (\tau_{j1}, \tau_{j2}, \tau_{j3}, \tau_{j4})'$  and  $\gamma_j = (\gamma_{j1}, \gamma_{j2}, \gamma_{j3}, \gamma_{j4})'$  are the effects of genotypes, blocks/lanes and barcodes for the  $j$ th gene. Without loss of generality, we set  $\alpha_{j4} = \tau_{j4} = \gamma_{j4} = 0$  for identifiability purposes.

We begin our analysis by testing whether any gene is differentially expressed across genotypes. The relevant hypotheses are

$$(7.1) \quad \begin{aligned} H_0 : \alpha_{j1} = \alpha_{j2} = \alpha_{j3} = 0 \quad \text{for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_a : \text{at least one component of } \alpha_j \text{ is not equal to 0 for some } j. \end{aligned}$$

Let  $\beta_j = (v_j, \alpha_{j1}, \alpha_{j2}, \alpha_{j3}, \tau_{j1}, \tau_{j2}, \tau_{j3}, \gamma_{j1}, \gamma_{j2}, \gamma_{j3})'$ . As in the second setting of the simulation study,  $D = [0_{3 \times 1}, I_3, 0_{3 \times 3}, 0_{3 \times 3}]$ .

We applied the proposed test for the hypotheses in (7.1). The value of the multi-level thresholding statistic in (4.6) was 1012.3. At the 5% significant level, we reject the null hypothesis when this statistic is larger than 3.08. Therefore, the proposed method provides a clear indication that the null hypothesis of (7.1) should be rejected. Next, we test whether any gene is differentially expressed between the reciprocal hybrid genotypes BM and MB. The value of the multi-level thresholding statistic was 37.83, which exceeds the critical value 3.08. Thus, there is evidence that some genes are differentially expressed between the reciprocal hybrids BM and MB.

We also applied the proposed multiple testing procedure to identify genes differentially expressed (DE) between the hybrids. We controlled at 5% the probability of FDP in excess of 0.1. The proposed method identified 32 DE genes between the reciprocal hybrids, while the BH procedure found only 23 of the 32 DE genes. Both the GW procedures based on the minimum  $p$ -value and the combined  $k$  approach found just 18 of the 23 identified by the BH procedure. These results are consistent with the findings of Theorem 6 and the simulation study: our proposed method tends to identify more genes as DE than does the GW approach, and it does not suffer power loss compared to the BH approach, while controlling the FDP exceedance rate.

**8. Extension.** The proposed multi-level thresholding test can be extended to more complicated scenarios. We discuss two possible extensions in this section: generalized linear mixed models (GLMMs) and high-dimensional predictors.

*GLMM.* We focus on a group random effects model. Suppose that the  $n = u \times v$  observations come from  $u$  groups with  $v$  observations in each group. Let  $y_{ijk}$  be the value of the  $k$ th observation of the  $j$ th response variable in the  $i$ th group, and let  $z_{ik}$  be the corresponding vector of explanatory variables, where  $i = 1, \dots, u$ ,  $j = 1, \dots, p$  and  $k = 1, \dots, v$ . Let  $\eta_j = (\eta_{1j}, \dots, \eta_{uj})'$  and  $\beta_j = (\beta_{j1}, \dots, \beta_{jm})'$  be random group effects and fixed treatment effects, respectively. Let  $\mu_{ijk} = E(y_{ijk} | \eta_{ij})$ . For the link function  $g(\cdot)$  and an unknown positive variance component  $\sigma_j^2$ ,

$$(8.1) \quad g(\mu_{ijk}) = z'_{ik}\beta_j + \eta_{ij} \quad \text{for } \eta_{ij} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} N(0, \sigma_j^2).$$

Define  $\theta_j = (\beta'_j, \phi_j, \sigma_j^2)'$ ,  $\tilde{Y}_{ij} = (y_{ij1}, \dots, y_{ijv})'$  and  $Z_i = (z'_{i1}, \dots, z'_{iv})'$ . Let  $\tilde{Y}_j = (\tilde{Y}'_{1j}, \dots, \tilde{Y}'_{uj})'$ . For the  $j$ th response variable in the  $i$ th group, the marginal probability density function of  $\tilde{Y}_{ij}$  is

$$(8.2) \quad f_j(w_1, \dots, w_v; Z_i, \theta_j) = \int \prod_{k=1}^v p_{ijk}(w_k | t; z'_{ik}, \beta_j, \phi_j) \phi_{\sigma_j^2}(t) dt,$$

where  $p_{ijk}(\cdot | t; z'_{ik}, \beta_j, \phi_j)$  is the conditional density of  $y_{ijk}$  given  $\eta_{ij} = t$ , and  $\phi_{\sigma_j^2}(t)$  is the  $N(0, \sigma_j^2)$  density. Due to the random group effects, observations are independent between groups but dependent within groups. Let  $\tilde{\theta}_j$  be the exact MLE. However, due to intractable integration in (8.2) for  $f_j(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)$ ,  $\tilde{\theta}_j$  may be unobtainable.

As the group random effects  $\eta_{ij}$  are Gaussian, Gauss–Hermite quadrature can be used to approximate  $f_j(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)$ . Let  $\hat{f}_{j,G}(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)$  be its approximation by the Gauss–Hermite quadrature of degree  $G$ . The exact MLE  $\tilde{\theta}_j$  can be approximated by  $\hat{\theta}_{j,G}$ , which maximizes the approximate log likelihood  $\sum_{i=1}^u \log\{\hat{f}_{j,G}(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)\}$  [McCulloch, Searle and Neuhaus (2008)]. Since the approximation error of  $\hat{f}_{j,G}(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)$  to  $f_j(\tilde{Y}_{ij}; Z_i, \theta_j)$  can be controlled by the quadrature degree  $G$ , a moderate deviation result similar to Lemma 1 could also hold for the approximate MLE  $\hat{\theta}_{j,G}$  with a carefully chosen  $G$ . This indicates that the thresholding test procedure could be applied in conjunction with the Gaussian quadrature approximation method.

*High-dimensional predictors.* The proposed procedure could be applied to the case of diverging number of predictors, namely, allowing  $m \rightarrow \infty$ . We illustrate the idea via the linear regression. For  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ ,

$$(8.3) \quad y_{ij} = z'_{ij}\beta_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad \text{for } \varepsilon_{ij} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} N(0, \sigma^2),$$

where  $z_{ij} = (z_{ij1}, \dots, z_{ijm})'$ ,  $\beta_j = (\beta_{j1}, \dots, \beta_{jm})'$ , and both the covariates and responses are high-dimensional such that  $m \gg n$  and  $p \gg n$ . For some covariate  $k$ , a hypothesis of interest is

$$(8.4) \quad H_0 : \beta_{jk} = 0 \quad \text{for all } j \quad \text{vs.} \quad H_a : \beta_{jk} \neq 0 \quad \text{for some } j.$$

Let  $\tilde{Y}_j = (y_{1j}, \dots, y_{nj})'$  and  $Z_j = (z_{1j}, \dots, z_{nj})'$ . For each response, we estimate  $\beta_j$  by the desparsified Lasso estimator

$$\hat{b}_j = \hat{\beta}_j + \hat{\Theta}_j Z_j' (\tilde{Y}_j - Z_j \hat{\beta}_j) / n$$

of Zhang and Zhang (2014) and van de Geer et al. (2014), where  $\hat{b}_j = (\hat{b}_{j1}, \dots, \hat{b}_{jm})'$ ,  $\hat{\beta}_j$  is the Lasso estimator, and  $\hat{\Theta}_j$  is from the node-wise regression of each covariate in the design matrix  $Z_j$  on all other covariates. See equations (7) and (8) of van de Geer et al. (2014). By Theorem 2.1 of van de Geer et al. (2014), the moderate deviation result for the desparsified Lasso estimators  $\hat{b}_j$  similar to Lemma 1 could be established under some suitable conditions. Based on this, the proposed procedures for signal detection and identification could be applied on  $\hat{b}_{jk}$  for the hypothesis (8.4).

APPENDIX

Here we provide the proof of Theorem 4, which is the key in the detection boundary analyzes. Proofs of the other theorems are given in the Supplementary Material [Qiu, Chen and Nettleton (2018)].

PROOF OF THEOREM 4. Consider the hypotheses (2.2) under the linear model

$$y_{ij} = z_i' \beta_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad \text{for } \varepsilon_{ij} \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} N(0, \sigma^2), i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, p.$$

Let  $Z = (z_1, \dots, z_n)'$ , and  $C_Z \subset \mathbf{R}^n$  be its column space with dimension  $m$ . Let  $\mu_{ij} = E(y_{ij})$ . Then, for each  $j$ , the  $j$ th response mean,  $(\mu_{1j}, \dots, \mu_{nj})'$ , is in  $C_Z$ . Let  $N_D \subset \mathbf{R}^m$  be the null space of  $D$ . Because  $D$  has  $d$  linearly independent rows, the dimension of  $N_D$  is  $m - d$ . Let  $E$  be an  $m \times (m - d)$  matrix whose column space is  $N_D$ . Under  $H_0$  in (2.2), we see that  $(\mu_{1j}, \dots, \mu_{nj})'$  is contained in the column space of  $ZE$  for each  $j = 1, \dots, p$ .

Following the argument for linear hypotheses in page 266 of Lehmann (1959), we would like to construct an  $n \times n$  orthogonal matrix  $G$  in such a way that the first  $m$  rows of  $G$  span  $C_Z$  with the  $(d + 1)$ th row to the  $m$ th row spanning the column space of  $ZE$ . Transform the responses by  $G$ . Let  $(y_{1j}^*, \dots, y_{nj}^*)' = G(y_{1j}, \dots, y_{nj})'$  and  $\eta_{ij} = E(y_{ij}^*)$  for  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $j = 1, \dots, p$ . Then, testing  $D\beta_j = 0$  is equivalent to testing  $\eta_{1j} = \dots = \eta_{dj} = 0$  for each  $j$ .

Let  $A = \sigma^{-1} \{D(Z'Z)^{-1}D'\}^{-1/2} D(Z'Z)^{-1}Z'$ . Note that  $AA' = \sigma^{-2} I_{d \times d}$ . It can be shown that the first  $d$  rows of  $G$  can be chosen as  $\sigma A$ . Then the first  $d$  transformed responses under the linear model are

$$y_{ij}^* = B_i \beta_j + \varepsilon_{ij}^* \quad \text{for } \varepsilon_{ij}^* \stackrel{\text{i.i.d.}}{\sim} N(0, 1),$$

where  $B_i$  is the  $i$ th row of  $B = \sigma^{-1}\{D(Z'Z)^{-1}D'\}^{-1/2}D$  for  $i = 1, \dots, d$ . Let  $r_i = Br/\sqrt{n}$ . The hypotheses (2.2) are equivalent to

$$(A.1) \quad \begin{aligned} H_0 : \eta_{1j} = \dots = \eta_{dj} = 0 \quad & \text{for } j = 1, \dots, p \quad \text{vs.} \\ H_a : \eta_{ij} \stackrel{\text{ind}}{\sim} (1 - \varepsilon)v_0 + \varepsilon v_{a_i} \quad & \text{for } i = 1, \dots, d \text{ and } j = 1, \dots, p, \end{aligned}$$

where  $\varepsilon = p^{-\kappa}$  for  $\kappa \in (0, 1)$ ,  $a_i = r_{t,i}\sqrt{2\log p}$  and  $r_{t,i}$  is the  $i$ th row of  $r_t$  for  $i = 1, \dots, d$ .

Let  $\mu = (a_1, \dots, a_d)'$ . Note that  $|\mu|^2 = r_t'r_t(2\log p)$ . Let  $P$  and  $Q$  be the distribution under  $H_0$  and  $H_a$  of (A.1). Due to the independence between responses, it follows that  $P = P_1^p$  and  $Q = Q_1^p$ , where  $P_1$  and  $Q_1$  are the distributions of the  $j$ th response under  $H_0$  and  $H_a$ , respectively. We have

$$\begin{aligned} H^2(P, Q) &= 2 - 2\left(1 - \frac{H^2(P_1, Q_1)}{2}\right)^p \\ &\text{for } H^2(P_1, Q_1) = \int \left(\sqrt{\frac{dQ_1}{d\Phi}} - 1\right)^2 d\Phi, \end{aligned}$$

where  $\Phi$  is the  $d$ -dimensional standard normal distribution.

It can be shown that, if  $H^2(P_1, Q_1) = o(p^{-1})$ , then  $H^2(P, Q) \rightarrow 0$ , and no test can distinguish  $H_0$  and  $H_a$  of (A.1), asymptotically. Let  $L(y) = dQ_1/d\Phi$  be the likelihood ratio. We have

$$\begin{aligned} L(y) &= \frac{(1 - \varepsilon)\exp(-y'y/2) + \varepsilon \int \exp\{-(y - \mu)'(y - \mu)/2\} dF(r)}{\exp(-y'y/2)} \\ &= (1 - \varepsilon) + \varepsilon \int \exp(y'\mu - \|\mu\|^2/2) dF(r). \end{aligned}$$

Let  $L_p$  be a multi-log( $p$ ) term which may change from case to case. Define  $f = \mu/\sqrt{2\log p}$ . By Jensen's inequality, it follows that

$$H^2(P_1, Q_1) \leq L_p \int \int \left\{ \sqrt{1 + p^{-\kappa}(p^{2w'f - r_*} - 1)} - 1 \right\}^2 p^{-w'w} dw dF(r),$$

where  $r_* = r_t'r_t$ . Given  $r$ , it can be shown that the leading order of the inner integration in the term above is

$$\int p^{\{2w'f - r_* - \kappa\} \wedge \{4w'f - 2r_* - 2\kappa\} - w'w} dw \cong p^{\max_w \{g(w, r_*)\}},$$

where  $g(w, r_*) = \{2w'f - r_* - \kappa\} \wedge \{4w'f - 2r_* - 2\kappa\} - w'w$ . Hence, the optimal detection boundary is determined by whether  $\max_{w, r \in \mathcal{G}} \{g(w, r_*)\}$  is larger or smaller than  $-1$ . It can be shown that

$$\max_{w \in \mathbf{R}^d} \{g(w, r_*)\} = \begin{cases} -\kappa & \text{if } r_* \geq \kappa, \\ -(\kappa + r_*)^2/4r_* & \text{if } \kappa/3 \leq r_* < \kappa, \\ 2r_* - 2\kappa & \text{if } r_* < \kappa/3, \end{cases}$$

and  $\max_w \{g(w, r_*)\}$  is an increasing function of  $r_*$ . The optimal detection boundary  $\text{DB}(\kappa)$  in Theorem 4 follows by noting  $\tilde{r} = \max_{r \in \mathcal{G}} \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} r_*$ .  $\square$

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

**Supplement to “Detecting rare and faint signals via thresholding maximum likelihood estimators”** (DOI: [10.1214/17-AOS1574SUPP](https://doi.org/10.1214/17-AOS1574SUPP); .pdf). The supplemental article contains additional empirical results, as well as the proofs of all the theoretical results not in the Appendix.

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