So, You Think You Have a Power Law, Do You? Well Isn't That Special?

Cosma Shalizi

Statistics Department, Carnegie Mellon University

Santa Fe Institute

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You are now free to tune me out and turn on social media

What Are Power Law Distributions? Why Care?

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\begin{aligned}
p(x) &\propto x^{-\alpha} \text{ (continuous)} \\
\mathrm{P}(X = x) &\propto x^{-\alpha} \text{ (discrete)} \\
\therefore \mathrm{P}(X \geq x) &\propto x^{-(\alpha-1)}
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Explicitly:

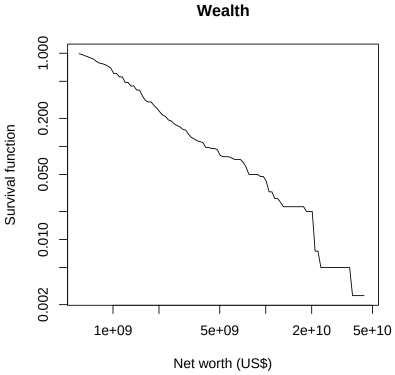
$$p(x) = \frac{\alpha - 1}{x_{\mathrm{min}}} \left(\frac{x}{x_{\mathrm{min}}} \right)^{-\alpha}$$

(discrete version involves the Hurwitz zeta function)

Money, Words, Cities

The three classic power law distributions

Pareto's law: wealth (richest 400 in US, 2003)



Money, Words, Cities

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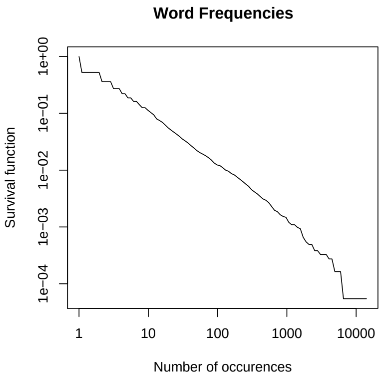
Zipf's law: word frequencies (*Moby Dick*)



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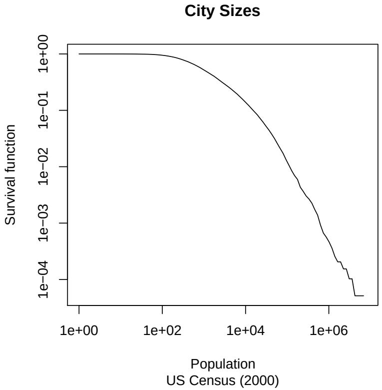

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$\therefore$ no "typical scale"
though $x_{\min}$ is the typical value

Origin Myths

Catchy and mysterious origin myth from physics:

- Distinct phases co-exist at phase transitions
- $\therefore$ Each phase can appear by fluctuation inside the other, and vice versa
- $\therefore$ Infinite-range correlations in space and time
- $\therefore$ Central limit theorem breaks down
- but macroscopic physical quantities are still averages
- $\therefore$ they must have a scale-free distribution
- So critical phenomena $\Rightarrow$ power laws

Origin Myths (cont.)

Deflating origin myths:

Piles of papers on my office floor [1, 2, 3]

- I start new piles at rate λ, so age of piles $\sim \mathrm{Exponential}(\lambda)$
- All piles start with size x_{min}
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Mixtures of exponentials work too [4]

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*word frequency, protein interaction degree (yeast), metabolic network degree (*E. coli*), Internet autonomous system network, calls received, intensity of wars, terrorist attack fatalities, bytes per HTTP request, species per genus, # sightings per bird species, population affected by blackouts, sales of best-sellers, population of US cities, area of wildfires, solar flare intensity, earthquake magnitude, religious sect size, surname frequency, individual net worth, citation counts, # papers authored, # hits per URL, in-degree per URL, # entries in e-mail address books, . . .*

$\Rightarrow$ Mason Porter's Power Law Shop


I WENT TO A PHYSICS
CONFERENCE AND ALL
I GOT WAS A LOUSY
POWER LAW.

How do physicists come up with their power laws?

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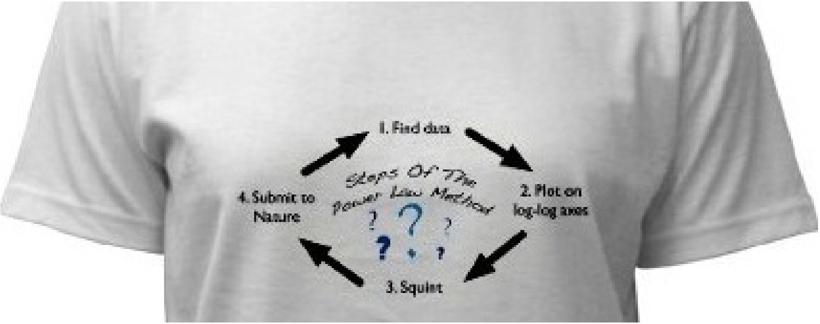
Fun fact: "statistical physics" involves no actual statistics


1. Find data
2. Plot on log-log axes
3. Squint
4. Submit to Nature
Steps Of The Power Law Method

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Least-squares line:

- Not a normalized distribution,
- All the inferential assumptions for regression fail
- Always has avoidable error as an estimate of α
- Easily get large R^2 for non-power-law distributions

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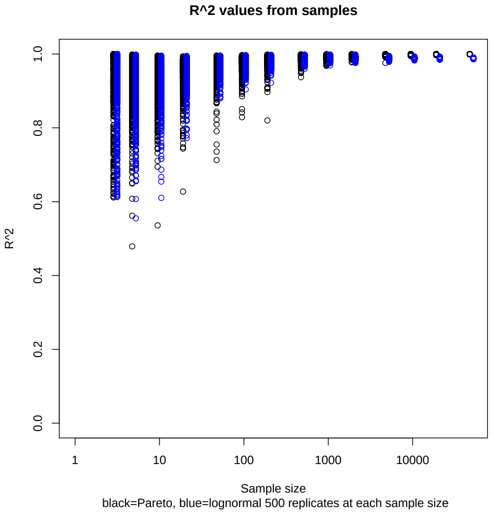
like a power law for $x \ll L$, like an exponential for $x \gg L$



R^2 for a log normal (limiting value > 0.9)

Abusing linear regression makes the baby Gauss cry

Blogospheric Navel-Gazing

Shirky [5]: in-degree of weblogs follows a power-law, many consequences for media ecology, etc., etc.

Data via [6]

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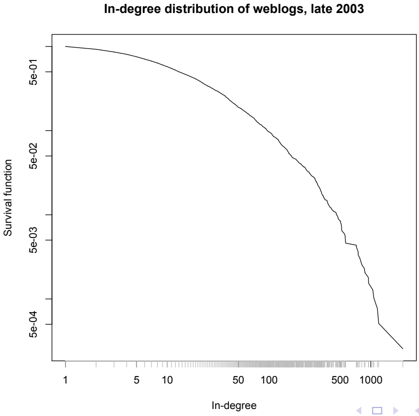

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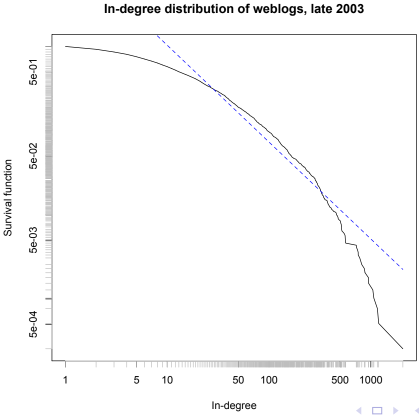

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Use maximum likelihood

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\widehat{\alpha} &= 1 + \frac{n}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \log x_i / x_{\min}}
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$\widehat{\alpha}$ depends on $x_{\min}$; "Hill" plot [9]

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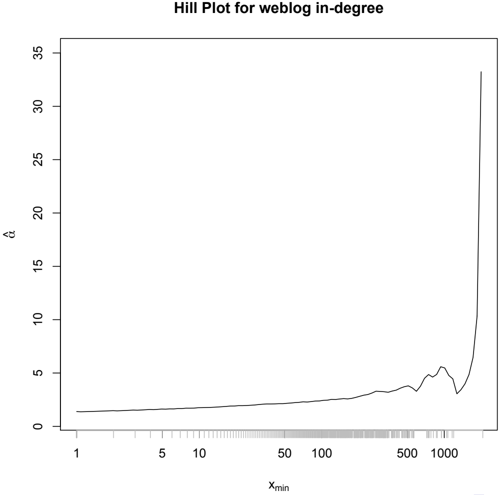

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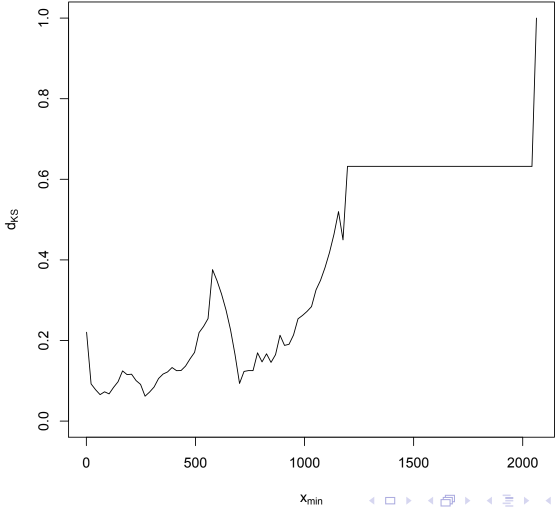
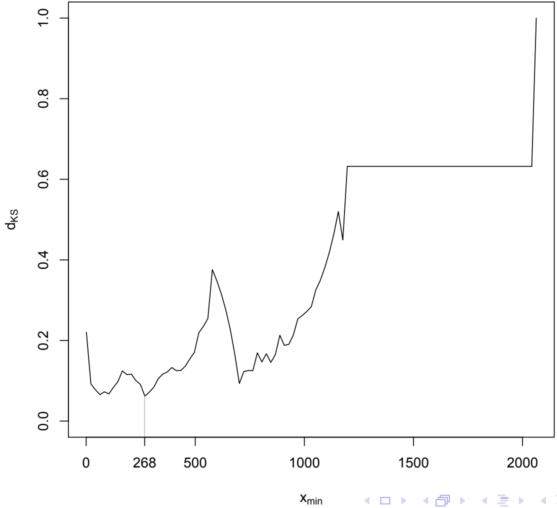
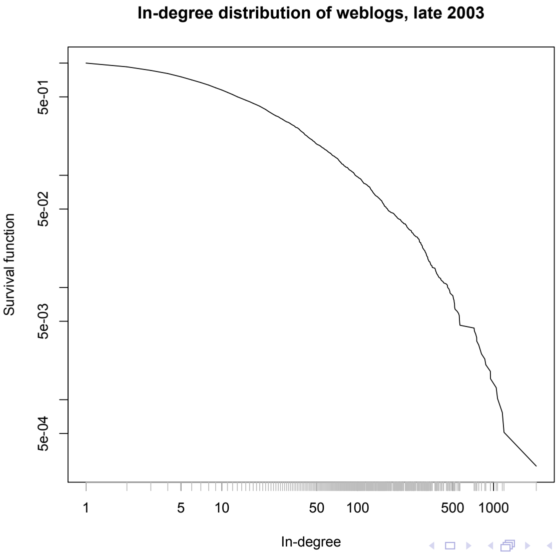
Minimize discrepancy between fitted and empirical distributions [10]:

$$\begin{aligned}\widehat{x_{\min}} &= \operatorname*{argmin}_{x_{\min}} \max_{x \geq x_{\min}} |\hat{P}_n(x) - P(x; \widehat{\alpha}, x_{\min})| \\ &= \operatorname*{argmin}_{x_{\min}} d_{KS}(\hat{P}_n, P(\widehat{\alpha}, x_{\min}))\end{aligned}$$


1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0.0
d_{KS}
0
500
1000
1500
2000
x_{min}

top 2.8%

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Survival function
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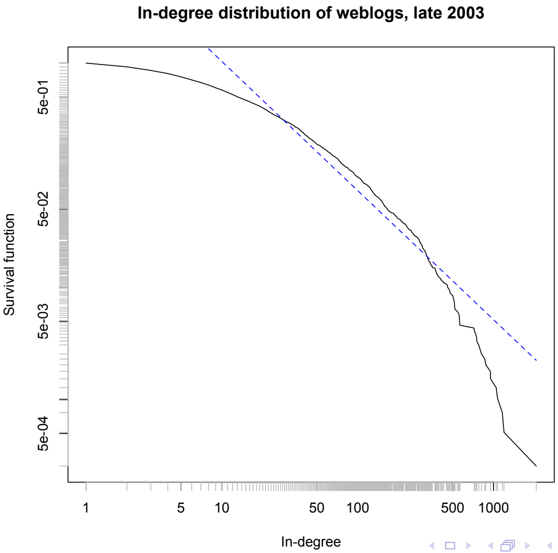
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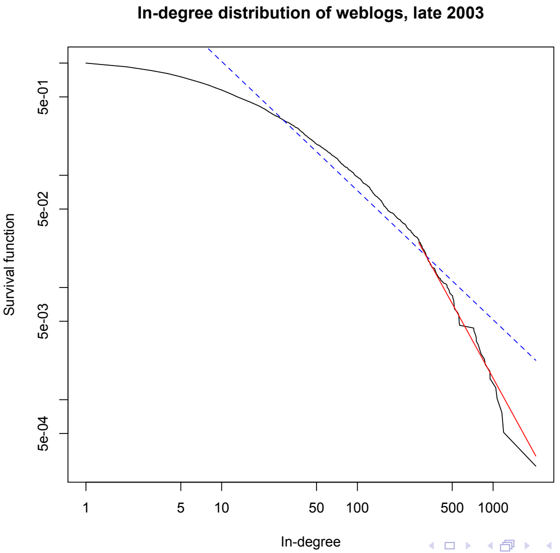
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or, use the bootstrap, like a civilized person

Given: n data points $x_{1:n}$

1. Estimate α and $x_{\min}$; $n_{\text{tail}} = \#$ of data points $\geq x_{\min}$
2. Calculate d_{KS} for data and best-fit power law $= d^*$
3. Draw n random values $b_1, \ldots b_n$ as follows:
    1. with probability n_{tail}/n, draw from power-law
    2. otherwise, pick one of the $x_i < x_{\min}$ uniformly
4. Find $\widehat{\alpha}$, $\widehat{x_{\min}}$, d_{KS} for $b_{1:n}$
5. Repeat many times to get distribution of d_{KS} values
6. p-value $=$ fraction of simulations where $d \geq d^*$

For the blogs: $p = 6.6 \times 10^{-2}$

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Two models, θ, ψ

$$\mathcal{R}(\psi, \theta) = \log p_{\psi}(x_{1:n}) - \log p_{\theta}(x_{1:n})$$

$\mathcal{R}(\psi, \theta) > 0$ means: the data were more likely under ψ than under θ
How much more likely do they need to be?

Distribution of Likelihood Ratios: Fixed Models

Assume $X_1, X_2, \ldots$ all IID, with true distribution ν
Fix θ and ψ; what is distribution of $n^{-1}\mathcal{R}(\psi, \theta)$?

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$$= \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} \log \frac{p_\psi(x_i)}{p_\theta(x_i)}$$

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mean of IID terms so use law of large numbers:

$$\frac{1}{n}\mathcal{R}(\psi, \theta) \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_\nu\left[\log \frac{p_\psi(X)}{p_\theta(X)}\right] = D(\nu \| \theta) - D(\nu \| \psi)$$

Distribution of Likelihood Ratios: Fixed Models

Assume $X_1, X_2, \ldots$ all IID, with true distribution ν
Fix θ and ψ; what is distribution of $n^{-1}\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta)$?

$$n^{-1}\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta) = \frac{\log p_\psi(x_{1:n}) - \log p_\theta(x_{1:n})}{n} = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} \log \frac{p_\psi(x_i)}{p_\theta(x_i)}$$

mean of IID terms so use law of large numbers:

$$\frac{1}{n}\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta) \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_\nu\left[\log \frac{p_\psi(X)}{p_\theta(X)}\right] = D(\nu\|\theta) - D(\nu\|\psi)$$

$\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta) > 0 \approx \psi$ diverges less from ν than θ does

Use CLT:

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{n}}\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta) \rightsquigarrow \mathcal{N}(\sqrt{n}(D(\nu\|\theta) - D(\nu\|\psi)), \omega^2_{\psi,\theta})$$

where

$$\omega^2_{\psi,\theta} = \mathrm{Var}\left[\log\frac{p_\psi(X)}{p_\theta(X)}\right]$$

so if the models are equally good, we get a mean-zero Gaussian but if one is better $\mathcal{R}(\psi,\theta) \to \pm\infty$, depending

Distribution of $\mathcal{R}$ with Estimated Models

two classes of models Ψ, Θ; $\hat{\psi}, \hat{\theta} =$ ML *estimated* models
$\hat{\psi} \rightarrow \psi^*$, $\hat{\theta} \rightarrow \theta^*$: converging to **pseudo-truth**; $\psi^* \neq \theta^*$
some regularity assumptions

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some regularity assumptions
Everything works out as if no estimation:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{\sqrt{n}}\mathcal{R}(\hat{\psi}, \hat{\theta}) & \rightsquigarrow \mathcal{N}(\sqrt{n}(D(\nu\|\theta^*) - D(\nu\|\psi^*)), \omega^2_{\psi^*,\theta^*}) \\ \frac{1}{n}\mathcal{R}(\hat{\psi}, \hat{\theta}) & \rightarrow D(\nu\|\theta^*) - D(\nu\|\psi^*) \\ \widehat{\omega}^2 \equiv \mathrm{Var}_{\mathrm{sample}}\left[\log\frac{p_\psi(X)}{p_\theta(X)}\right] & \rightarrow \omega^2_{\psi^*,\theta^*} \end{aligned}$$

Vuong's Test for Non-Nested Model Classes

Assume all conditions from before

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- Don't need to adjust for parameter #, but any $o(n)$ adjustment is fine; [13] is probably better than $*$IC
- Does *not* assume that truth is in either Ψ or Θ
- *Does* assume $\psi^* \neq \theta^*$

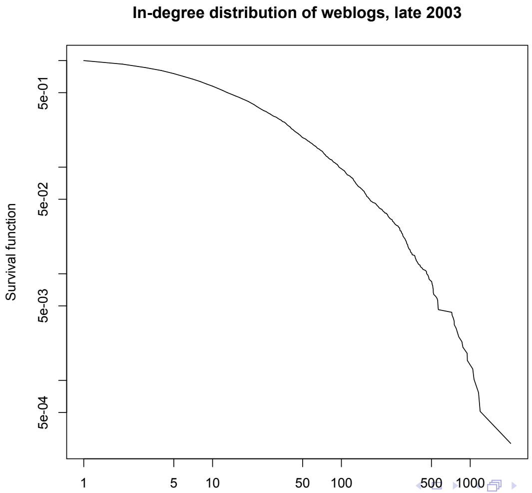
Back to Blogs

Fit a log-normal to the same tail (to give the advantage to power law)

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathcal{R}(\text{power law}, \text{log}-\text{normal}) &= -0.85 \\
\widehat{\omega} &= 0.098 \\
\frac{\mathcal{R}}{\sqrt{n\widehat{\omega}^2}} &= -0.83
\end{aligned}$$

so the log-normal fits better, but not by much — we'd see fluctuations at least that big 41% of the time if they were equally good

Fitting a log-normal to the complete data



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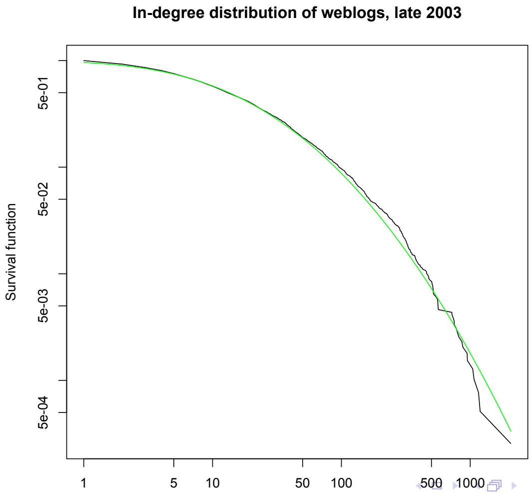
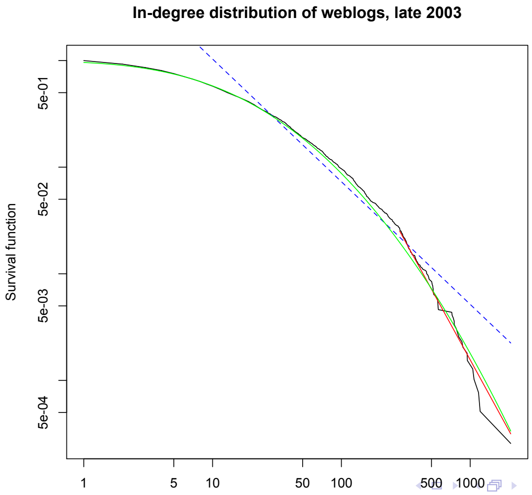


Fitting a log-normal to the complete data



Visualization

Beyond the log-log plot: Handcock and Morris's relative distribution [14, 15]

Compare two whole distributions, not just mean/variance etc.

Visualization

Beyond the log-log plot: Handcock and Morris's relative distribution [14, 15]

Compare two whole distributions, not just mean/variance etc.

Have a **reference distribution**, CDF F_0 (or just a **reference sample**) and a **comparison sample** $y_1, \ldots y_n$

Construct **relative data**

$$r_i = F_0(y_i)$$

relative CDF:

$$G(r) = F(F_0^{-1}(r))$$

relative density

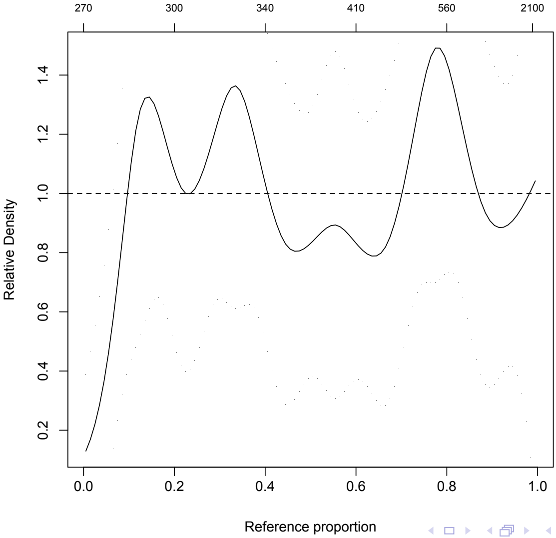
$$g(r) = \frac{f(F_0^{-1}(r))}{f_0(F_0^{-1}(r))}$$

- Relative data are uniform ⇔ distributions are the same
- $g(r)$ tells us *where* and *how* the distributions differ
- Can estimate $G(r)$ by empirical CDF of r_i
- Can estimate $g(r)$ by non-parametric density estimation on r_i
- Invariant under any monotone transformation of the data (multiplication, taking logs, etc.)
- Related to Neyman's smooth test of goodness-of-fit
- Can adjust for covariates flexibly [15]

R package: `reldist`, from CRAN

Relative Distribution with Power Laws

1. Estimate power law distribution from data
2. Use that as the reference distribution


270
300
340
410
560
2100
Relative Density
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1.0
1.2
1.4
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1.0
Reference proportion

How Bad Is the Literature?

[10] looked at 24 claimed power laws

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*word frequency, protein interaction degree (yeast), metabolic network degree (*E. coli*), Internet autonomous system network, calls received, intensity of wars, terrorist attack fatalities, bytes per HTTP request, species per genus, # sightings per bird species, population affected by blackouts, sales of best-sellers, population of US cities, area of wildfires, solar flare intensity, earthquake magnitude, religious sect size, surname frequency, individual net worth, citation counts, # papers authored, # hits per URL, in-degree per URL, # entries in e-mail address books*

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Of these, the *only* clear power law is word frequency
The rest: indistinguishable from log-normal and/or stretched exponential; and/or cut-off significantly better than pure power law; and/or goodness-of-fit is just horrible

What's Bad About Hallucinating Power Laws?

Scientists should not try to explain things which don't happen

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Decision-makers waste resources planning for power laws which don't exist

Does It Really Matter Whether It's a *Power Law*?

Maybe all that matters is that the distribution has a heavy tail

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Do look at density estimation methods for heavy-tailed distributions [18, 19]

- Data-independent transformation from $[0, \infty)$ to $[0, 1]$
- Nonparametric density estimate on $[0, 1]$
- Inverse transform

The Correct Line

1. Lots of distributions give straightish log-log plots
2. Regression on log-log plots is bad; don't do it, and don't believe those who do it.
3. Use maximum likelihood to estimate the scaling exponent
4. Use goodness of fit to estimate the scaling region
5. Use goodness of fit tests to check goodness of fit
6. Use Vuong's test to check alternatives
7. Ask yourself whether you really care

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