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# Transformation Forests

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# Machine Learning

Machine Learning methods give

*computers the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed.*

(Arthur Samuel, 1959)

Actually: Fit statistical models to data by clever optimisation of appropriate target functions

# Machine Learning



Source: <https://xkcd.com/1838/>

# Statistical Learning

An oxymoron, like “Statistical Science”

Either you learn, or you estimate

# Statistical Modelling

Too dull a term to attract any grant money

However: Explicitly acknowledges the underlying probabilistic theory

# Statistical Models

What is a statistical model?

$$Y \sim \mathbb{P}_Y$$

What is a regression model?

$$Y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x} \sim \mathbb{P}_{Y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}}$$

## Random Forest

What is a random forest (in general, not only B&C)?

Classical:

$$\mathbb{E}(Y | \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = f(\mathbf{x}), \quad \forall \mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{X}$$

Here:

$$\mathbb{P}(Y \leq y | \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = \mathbb{P}_{Y|\mathbf{X}=\mathbf{x}}(y) = f(y | \mathbf{x}), \quad \forall \mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{X}$$

## Parametric (!) Setup

Unconditional model for response

$$\mathbb{P}_{Y,\Theta} = \{\mathbb{P}_{Y,\vartheta} \mid \vartheta \in \Theta\}$$

Assumption: Regression model belongs to this family:

$$\mathbb{P}_{Y|\mathbf{X}=\mathbf{x}} = \mathbb{P}_{Y,\vartheta(\mathbf{x})}$$

Task: Estimate  $\vartheta$  function



## Likelihood Contributions

“Learning” data  $(y_i, \mathbf{x}_i)$ ,  $i = 1, \dots, N$  plus family  $\mathbb{P}_{\mathcal{Y}, \Theta}$  defines likelihood function

$$\ell_i : \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$$

$\ell_i(\vartheta(\mathbf{x}_i))$  gives the likelihood for observation  $i$  with candidate parameters  $\vartheta(\mathbf{x}_i)$

Handle censoring and truncation appropriately here

## Adaptive Local Likelihood Estimators

$$\hat{\vartheta}^N(\mathbf{x}) := \arg \max_{\vartheta \in \Theta} \sum_{i=1}^N w_i^N(\mathbf{x}) \ell_i(\vartheta)$$

Conditioning works via weight functions  $w_i^N(\mathbf{x})$  only

# Unconditional Maximum Likelihood

$$\hat{\vartheta}_{\text{ML}}^N := \arg \max_{\vartheta \in \Theta} \sum_{i=1}^N \ell_i(\vartheta)$$

# Trees

$$\mathcal{X} = \dot{\bigcup}_{b=1, \dots, B} \mathcal{B}_b$$

$$w_{\text{Tree}, i}^N(\mathbf{x}) := \sum_{b=1}^B I(\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{B}_b \wedge \mathbf{x}_i \in \mathcal{B}_b)$$

$$\hat{\vartheta}_{\text{Tree}}^N(\mathbf{x}) := \arg \max_{\vartheta \in \Theta} \sum_{i=1}^N w_{\text{Tree}, i}^N(\mathbf{x}) \ell_i(\vartheta)$$

## Forests

$$\mathcal{X} = \dot{\bigcup}_{b=1, \dots, B_t} \mathcal{B}_{tb} \text{ for } t = 1, \dots, T \text{ trees}$$

$$w_{\text{Forest},i}^N(\mathbf{x}) := \sum_{t=1}^T \sum_{b=1}^{B_t} I(\mathbf{x} \in \mathcal{B}_{tb} \wedge \mathbf{x}_i \in \mathcal{B}_{tb})$$

$$\hat{\vartheta}_{\text{Forest}}^N(\mathbf{x}) := \arg \max_{\vartheta \in \Theta} \sum_{i=1}^N w_{\text{Forest},i}^N(\mathbf{x}) \ell_i(\vartheta)$$

## OK, Done! Really?

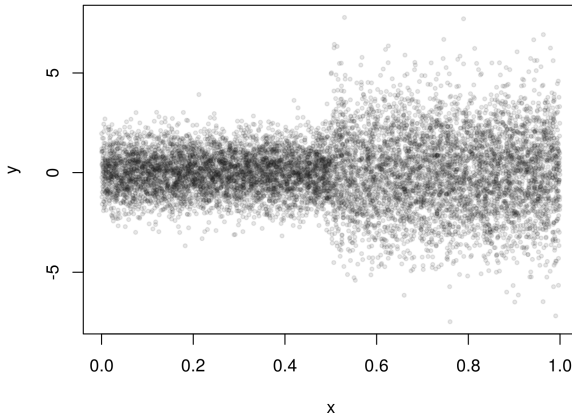
These “nearest neighbor weights” have been used before, first in

- “bagging survival trees” (2004), in
- “conditional inference forests” (**party(kit)**, since 2005) and in
- “quantile regression forests” (**quantregForest**, since 2006)

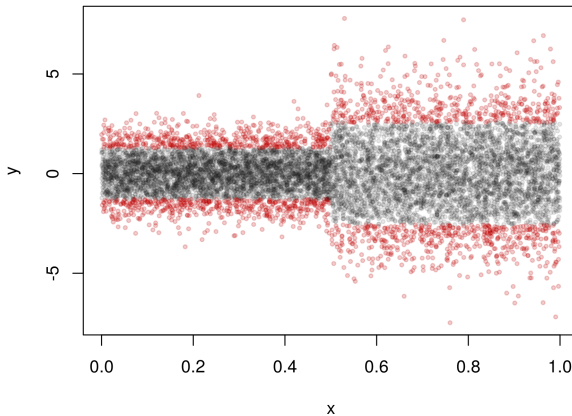
with *standard* trees (CART- or CTree-like).

Unfortunately, there is a catch.

# The Problem

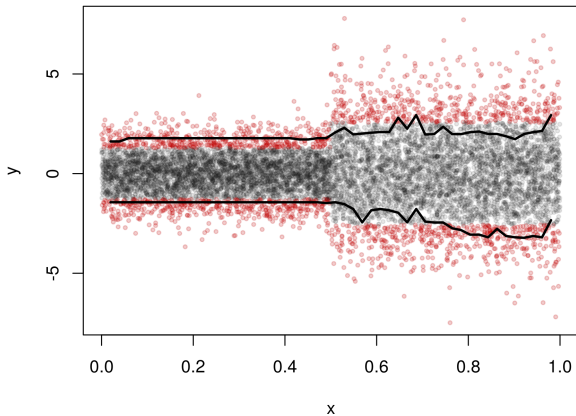


# The Problem

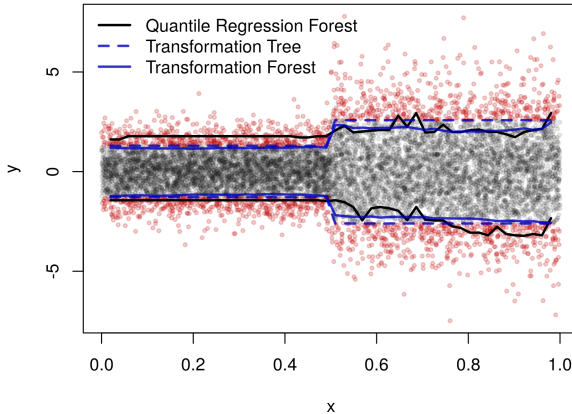




# The Problem



# The Problem



## The Solution

We need splits sensitive to *distributional* and not just *mean* changes.

Generic approach (“Distribution trees and forests”):

$$\mathbb{P}(Y \leq y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = \mathbb{P}_{Y, \vartheta(\mathbf{x})}(y)$$

Here: Use transformation model

$$\mathbb{P}(Y \leq y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = F_Z(\mathbf{a}(y)^\top \vartheta(\mathbf{x}))$$

## Why Transformation Models?

With

$$\mathbb{P}(Y \leq y) = \mathbb{P}(h(Y) \leq h(y)) = F_Z(h(y))$$

we can generate *all* distributions  $\mathbb{P}_Y$  from some  $F_Z$  and a corresponding  $h$ .

Suitable parameterisations of  $h(y) = \mathbf{a}(y)^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}$  preserve much of this generality.

## Why Transformation Models?

As we *always* observe intervals  $(\underline{y}, \bar{y}]$  the exact likelihood is

$$\mathcal{L}(\boldsymbol{\vartheta} | Y \in (\underline{y}, \bar{y}]) := F_Z(\mathbf{a}(\bar{y})^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}) - F_Z(\mathbf{a}(\underline{y})^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta})$$

- Always defined, always a probability (Lindsey, 1999, JRSS-D)
- Applicable to discrete responses
- Covers all types of random censoring and truncation
- For a precise datum  $y$  of some continuous  $Y$ , the likelihood can be *approximated* by the density

$$f_Y(y) = f_Z(\mathbf{a}(y)^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}) \mathbf{a}'(y)^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}$$

## Parameterisation

Transformation trees and forests based on parameterisation

$$\mathbb{P}(Y \leq y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = F_Z(\mathbf{a}_{\text{Bs},d}(y)^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}(\mathbf{x}))$$

- $\mathbf{a}_{\text{Bs},d}(y)^\top \boldsymbol{\vartheta}(\mathbf{x})$  is a smooth, monotonic Bernstein polynomial of degree  $d$
- $d = 1$  with  $F_Z = \Phi$  means  $\mathbb{P}_{Y|\mathbf{X}=\mathbf{x}} = \mathcal{N}(\mu(\mathbf{x}), \sigma^2(\mathbf{x}))$
- $d = 5$  is surprisingly flexible

# Model-based Recursive Partitioning (MOB)

## Core idea

- Fit parameters  $\hat{\vartheta}_{\text{ML}}$  in *unconditional* model  $\mathbb{P}_{Y,\vartheta}$
- Compute individual gradient contributions (“scores”)

$$\mathbf{s}_i = \left. \frac{\partial \ell_i(\vartheta)}{\partial \vartheta} \right|_{\vartheta = \hat{\vartheta}_{\text{ML}}}$$

- Select predictor from  $\mathbf{x}$  with strongest parameter instability as indicated by highest association to  $\mathbf{s}_i, i = 1, \dots, N$
- Find “best” binary split; repeat recursively

Implemented for many models, including (G)LM(M)s, parametric survival,  $\beta$ -regression, spatial lag, Bradley-Terry-Luce, various Item Response Theory models, subgroup analyses, etc.

## Transformation Trees (TTree)

- Start with  $\hat{\vartheta}_{ML}^N$
- Search for parameter instabilities in  $\hat{\vartheta}_{ML}^N$  as a function of  $\mathbf{x}$  using (a beefed-up version) of MOB
- Potentially find changes in the mean AND higher moments
- Forests: Aggregate these trees via adaptive local likelihood estimation



## Transformation Forests (TForest)

$$\hat{\mathbb{P}}(Y \leq y \mid \mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = \Phi(\mathbf{a}_{Bs,d}(y)^\top \hat{\boldsymbol{\vartheta}}_{\text{Forest}}^N(\mathbf{x}))$$

makes the forest “parametric” (one model for each  $\mathbf{x}$ ) with

- Forest likelihood
- Prediction intervals
- Likelihood-based variable importance
- Parametric bootstrap
- ...

and applicable to censored and truncated data.

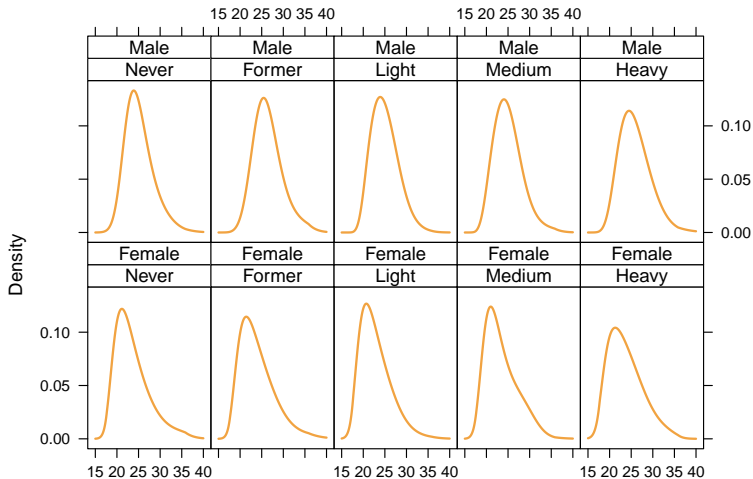
## Swiss Body Mass Index Distributions

2012 survey ( $N = 16427$ ) in Switzerland

Explain conditional distribution of BMI given

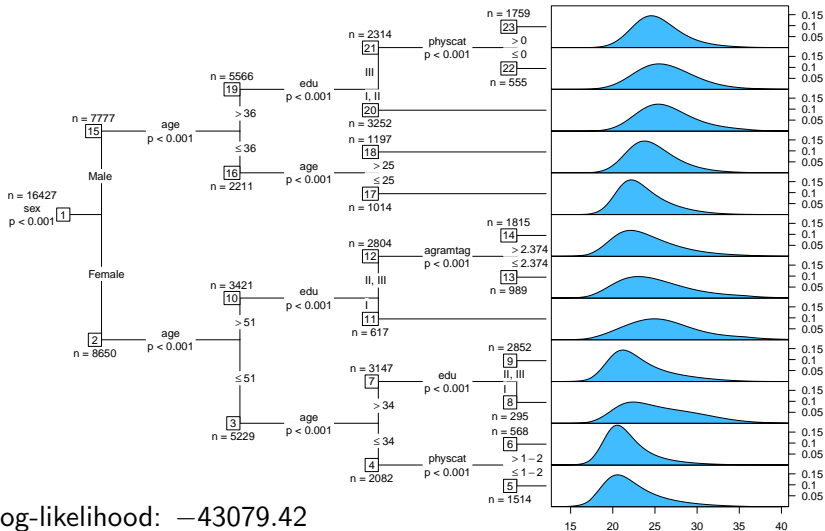
- Sex,
- Smoking status,
- Age,
- Education,
- Physical activity,
- Alcohol intake,
- Fruit and vegetable consumption,
- Region, and
- Nationality.

# BMI by Sex and Smoking

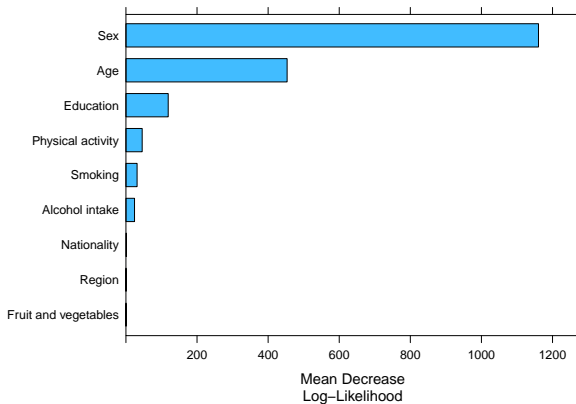


Log-likelihood:  $-43564.30$  BMI

# Transformation Tree

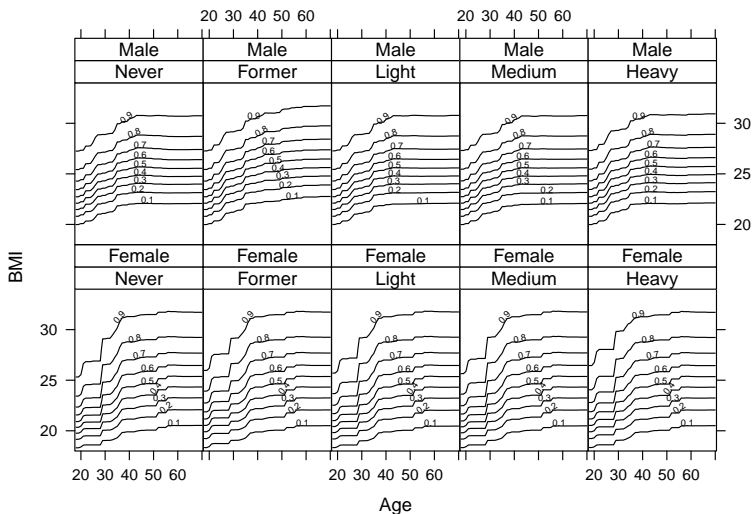


# Transformation Forest: Variable Importance



Log-likelihood:  $-42520.18$

# Transformation Forest: Partial Deciles



## Discussion

- The “two cultures” of statistical modelling come closer
- With  $Y = \text{BMI, rain, house prices, survival time etc.}$

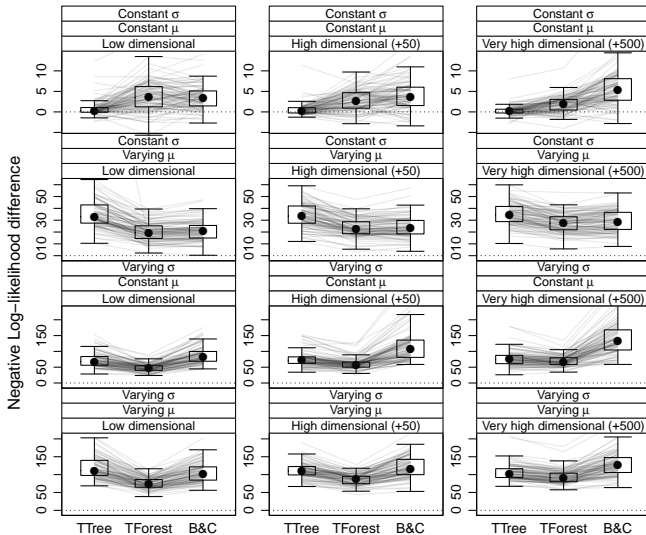
$$\hat{\mathbb{E}}(Y|\mathbf{X} = \mathbf{x}) = \hat{f}(\mathbf{x}) = \mathbf{x}^\top \hat{\beta}$$

not interesting (or even harmful)

- $\mathbb{P}_{Y, \hat{\theta}(\mathbf{x})}$  more informative
- Flexibility (non-linear interactions) of B&C random forests preserved
- Simplicity of B&C random forests preserved
- Large sample behaviour?
- High dimensional?

# Low and High

$$Y \sim N(\mu(\mathbf{x}), \sigma^2(\mathbf{x}))$$



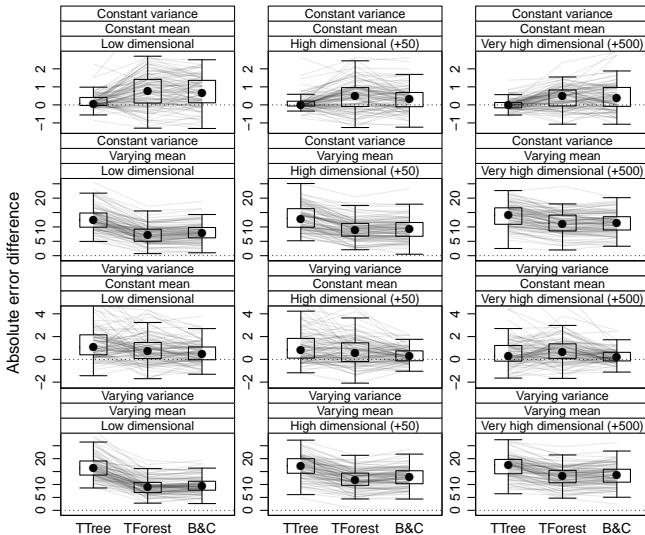


## Resources

- “Transformation Forests”, **trtf**,  
<https://arxiv.org/abs/1701.02110>,
- “Top-Down Transformation Choice” (with BMI example),  
SM, **trtf**, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1706.08269>
- “Most Likely Transformations”, SJoS, **mlt**, **tram**,  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/sjos.12291>
- “Conditional Transformation Models”, JRSS-B,  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/rssb.12017>
- “Model-based Recursive Partitioning”, JCGS, **partykit**  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1198/106186008X319331>,
- “Model-based Recursive Partitioning for Subgroup  
Analyses”, IJB, **model4you**  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/ijb-2015-0032>
- “Model-based Forests”, SMMR, **model4you**,  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0962280217693034>

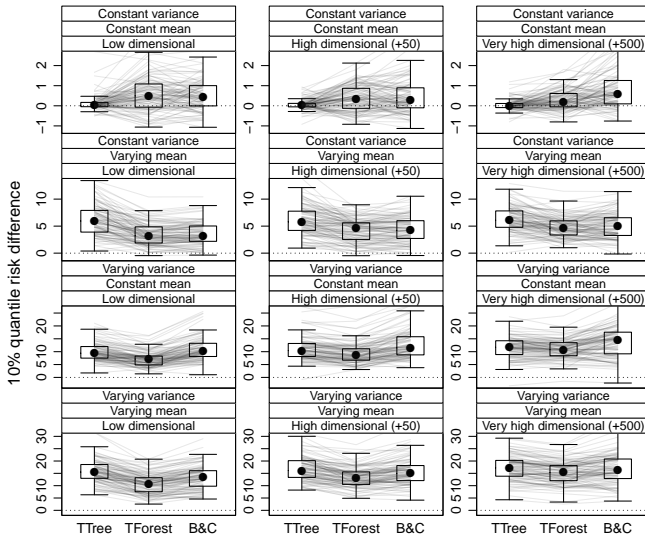
# Low and High: Median

$$Y \sim N(\mu(\mathbf{x}), \sigma^2(\mathbf{x}))$$



# Low and High: 10% Quantile

$$Y \sim N(\mu(\mathbf{x}), \sigma^2(\mathbf{x}))$$



# Low and High: 90% Quantile

$$Y \sim N(\mu(\mathbf{x}), \sigma^2(\mathbf{x}))$$

