A Comparison of Methods for the Evaluation of Text Summarization Techniques

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Abstract: Automatic Text Summarization techniques aim to extract key information from one or more input texts automatically, producing summaries and preserving the meaning of content. These techniques are divided into two main families: Extractive and Abstractive, which differ for their operating mode. The former picks up sentences directly from the document text, whilst the latter produces a summary by interpreting the text and rephrases sentences by incorporating information. Therefore, there is the need to evaluate and verify how close a summary is to original text. The research question is: how to evaluate the quality of the summaries produced by these techniques? Different metrics and scores have been proposed in the literature (e.g., ROUGE) for the evaluation of text summarization. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to deeply estimate the behaviour of the ROUGE metric. In particular, we performed a first experiment to compare the metric efficiency for the evaluation of the Abstractive versus Extractive Text Summarization algorithms while, in a second one, we compared the obtained score for two different summary approaches: the simple execution of a summarization algorithm versus the multiple execution of different algorithms on the same text. The conclusions lead to the following interesting results: ROUGE does not achieve excellent results, because it has similar performance on both the Abstractive and Extractive algorithms; multiple execution works better than single one most of the time.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today is available a great deal of textual data, arising from various sources. Being able to get knowledge from these, especially from long texts, is an increasingly complex challenge for humans. The information technology development, particularly in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) field, has brought out ever more sophisticated techniques for managing and processing data. New innovative algorithms, inter alia, are always proposed for the processing and extraction of the most useful information from texts, even those written by human.

These techniques, grouped as Automatic Text Summarization, allow the creation of summaries composed of key concepts of any input text. In order to obtain algorithms capable of producing a summary from a text, these are divided into two main families:

- Extractive: it selects phrases from the input text, choosing those that best cover all the key information, discarding redundancy;
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• Abstractive: it tries to elaborate a new corpus, using different and more appropriate words, a different semantic composition, so as to output a simpler text.

As can be easily deduced from the above, the Abstractive Automatic Text Summarization (AATS) techniques are much more interesting than the Extractive (EATS) ones. The literature proposes different approaches for both methodologies, exploiting supervised and unsupervised algorithms (Dalal and Malik, 2013). The main question is to evaluate the quality of the summaries produced by these methods. The difficulty in comparing one summary with another, requires a metric that is easily comparable and as possible unbiased.

ROUGE (Recall-Oriented Understudy Gisting Evaluation) is the most used topic evaluation metric. It is based on the overlapping (expressed as a numeric value) of words between the system summary and the human one, without considering their semantic and syntactic correctness.

The current literature is more focused on finding new summarization algorithms rather than on those to

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evaluate them. This work, instead, tends to compare various algorithms on a standard dataset and with a well-defined methodology. In particular, the goal consists of two distinct research activities: *i*) evaluate the performance of the ROUGE metric on the results of the Abstractive and Extractive algorithms; *ii*) test the efficiency of its score on two different summarization methods.

By definition, in order to produce a summary, EATS choose parts from the original text, while AATS tend to use new words so, the former should perform much better because they may have a greater overlapping of words. Is done a first experiment to prove this hypothesis. A second one, instead, involves a test on two different methodologies: the simple execution of a text summarization (TS) algorithm versus a multiple sequential execution on the same text, in order to evaluate by the chosen metric, which of the technique is better if the compression rate increases.

The paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, the most recent technologies proposed by the literature on Abstractive and Extractive methods are explored. Section 3 shows the experiment design, taking care to ensure its reproducibility. The experiment is conducted on a standard dataset¹. Section 4 discusses the experiment results, whilst in Section 5 the threats to validity are discussed. Finally, Section 6 draws the conclusions as well as outlines some ideas for future works.

2 STATE OF THE ART

As seen in the previous section, there are two types of approaches to TS: *Extractive* and *Abstractive*. Below are explored the most common techniques for the two types, trying to understand what is the best way of evaluation of a system-generated summary.

(de Oliveira, 2005) shows by specific experiments, that for a human, the summary quality evaluation is subjective, because it depends on individual criteria of relevance, comprehensibility and readability.

Unfortunately, often the evaluation metrics offer a statistical approach, counting the overlapping of words between the generated summary and the original text, not considering the semantic meaning of what the text offers. In this work, the ROUGE metric for the experiment results is considered (but there are various other evaluation methods such as Pyramid (Nenkova and Passonneau, 2004) and SSAS (Vadapalli et al., 2017; Gupta and Gupta, 2019)).

¹**CNN/Daily-Mail** is mostly used by researchers to evaluate new summarization techniques.

2.1 Extractive Method

Most recent studies, particularly in Deep Learning (DL) and AI fields, have led to consolidate innovative and more sophisticated EATS techniques. Here are described some of the most interesting ones found in literature, including those based on Neural Networks, Graphs and Semantic approaches.

In (Keyvanpour et al., 2019) are clearly explained the basic steps of a TS task. These include a preprocessing phase, a sentence scoring phase and a final phase of text extraction and summary generation. In order to represent a text with the aim of text summarization, the literature suggests some methods, by the use of vectors and matrices that will represent the features extracted from the text.

Neural Network Approaches. Neural networks are widely used especially for the generation of complex features starting from the input text. (Suleiman and Awajan, 2019) gives an overview of the most common algorithms used today: the Restricted Boltzmann Machine (Verma and Nidhi, 2017; Rezaei et al., 2019), particular neural networks composed of an input layer and a hidden layer, where the connection occurs only between neurons of different layers, the Variation Auto-Encoder (Yousefi-Azar and Hamey, 2017) based on a neural network consisting of an encoder, a decoder and a loss function and the Recurrent Neural Networks (Chen and Le Nguyen, 2019) made up of a sequence of hidden layers where, for the TS field, a sequence of words is given as input to the network, while output is formed by the summary words. Graph Approaches. Instead in (Janjanam and Reddy, 2019) is introduced an approach for TS using Graphs. A popular TS model based on the graph approach is PageRank. It is based on Hits algorithms

developed by Google (Page et al., 1999). Other interesting approaches in the literature see the use of the graph as a semantic network between sentences (Han et al., 2016) or as input for a convolutional network (Yasunaga et al., 2017).

Semantic Approaches. Many commonly used TS models are based on statistical methods, which usually do not consider the semantic or contextual meaning of the analyzed text. But through the Semantic Role Labeling, sentences in a document are well clustered, facilitating the formation of groups of similar elements. In (Liu et al., 2018), authors used Semantic Analysis to represent sentences in an Abstractive mode, generating summaries with promising results. Instead, in (Khan et al., 2018) is established that semantic knowledge of the text is fundamental also in the methodology of AATS.

2.2 Abstractive Method

In recent years, after the rapid expansion of neural networks and DL techniques, researchers have built a solid base for the creation of Abstractive algorithms, which goes beyond the classical approaches of Natural Language Processing (NLP). In particular, DL models like those based on seq2seq and attentionmodel, have brought the study of AATS to a high level, sometimes obtaining better results than Extractive methods.

Seq2seq Model. It is a popular neural network model based on the encoder-decoder architecture. Generally, in the literature, particular types of neural networks are chosen as internal components for the encoder and decoder, such as Recurrent Neural Network (RNN) (Nallapati et al., 2016), Gated Recurrent Neural Network (GRU) or Long Short Term Memory (LSTM). The latter are the most used because they determine long-term dependencies, overcoming the gradient problem.

Transformer Network. In (Vaswani et al., 2017) is proposed a new network architecture, called Transformer, based exclusively on the attention-mechanism. It avoids the use of recurrence, as has been done so far by sequence modeling, providing a new approach that allows the dependencies modeling without the consideration of their distance in the input or output sequence.

2.3 ROUGE Metric

The ROUGE measure identifies a set of different indexes to quantify the quality of a system summary. In literature, the most used metrics are ROUGE-1, ROUGE-2 and ROUGE-L based on the different granularity of the analyzed texts. Indeed, ROUGE-1 refers to the overlapping of unigrams between the system summary and the reference summary; ROUGE-2 to the overlapping of bigrams; instead ROUGE-L measures the longest common word sequence, computed by the Longest Common Subsequence (LCS) algorithm.

2.4 Bert

In (Devlin et al., 2018) is introduced Bert (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers). Its model architecture consists of a bidirectional multilayer Transformer encoder, based on the implementation of (Vaswani et al., 2017).

3 EXPERIMENT DESIGN

3.1 Scope Definition

The proposed experiment has two research questions (RQs). The first is inspired by a wide study of the literature, which has raised some doubts regarding to the most commonly used metric to evaluate the quality of Automatic Text Summarization algorithms. In particular, this work focuses on understanding how well the ROUGE metric score is actually good for evaluating the quality of a summary, both for Extractive and Abstractive methods (as explained above the Extractive methods should produce better results). The second target is based on exploring how better it is to use a multiple execution of TS algorithms instead of a single execution, based on the ROUGE scores. Summing up:

• *RQ1*: How different is the ROUGE score achieved by the EATS methods compared to the AATS ones? Can this metric score be representative of the quality of a summary generated by a text summarization algorithm?

Object of study is the ROUGE score obtained in both the EATS and AATS algorithms. *Purpose* is to estimate reliability and efficiency of this metric in both cases.

• *RQ2*: How much differs the multiple execution of a summary (execution in sequence of two TS algorithms on the same text, where the output of the first is used as input for the second) compared to the single execution (the summary is obtained with a single execution of an algorithm)? Is the ROUGE score relevant to evaluate the two methods?

Object of study is related to the multiple and single execution of TS algorithms. *Purpose* is to evaluate the quality of the generated summary by the two techniques against the ROUGE score.

For both RQs: *Perspective* is a researcher's point of view and *Context* of experiment execution is the use of TS algorithms on a standard texts dataset.

3.2 Experiment Planning

The planning phase shows in detail the various steps followed for the experiment.

Context Selection. The experiment was conducted in off-line mode. The goal for the first RQ, is to compare the validity and accuracy of the ROUGE metric for the two types of Automatic Text Summarization approaches. For the second RQ instead, will be compared two TS methodologies to evaluate their efficiency by using the same metric.

Hypotheses Formulation. For the statistical analysis of the experiment, two hypotheses are formulated: the *null* and the *alternative*, with the aim to confirm or reject one of them. Formal descriptions of both hypotheses for the two RQs are provided in the following, taking into consideration the ROUGE metric for the comparison.

• *RQ1 Null*: AATS methods have different performances from the EATS ones. (This is because the Extractive methods use in the output summary, parts of the original text that should provide a different overlap ratio of N-grams, compared to the Abstractive methods, which use new words in the generated summary and therefore different N-grams).

$$H_0: \mu_{ROUGE_Ext} \neq \mu_{ROUGE_Abs} \tag{1}$$

where μ is the mean and ROUGE the score of each summary.

• *RQ1 Alternative*: The AATS methods have almost the same performance as the EATS ones. (This may show that the ROUGE metric is not suitable for the system generated summary evaluation).

 $H_A: \mu_{ROUGE_Ext} = \mu_{ROUGE_Abs}$ (2)

• *RQ2 Null*: Multiple executions of the TS algorithms on the same text, lead to less or equal result of a single execution on the same text.

$$H_0: \mu_{ROUGE_Multiple} \le \mu_{ROUGE_Single}$$
 (3)

• *RQ2 Alternative*: Multiple executions of the TS algorithms on the same text, lead to better results than those of a single execution on the same text.

$$H_A: \mu_{ROUGE_Multiple} > \mu_{ROUGE_Single}$$
(4)

where μ is the mean and ROUGE the score of each summary.

Variable Selection. A fundamental step during the experiment planning, is the variables selection. Independent variables are the ones that we can control and modify during the experiment. The dependent variables instead, measure the effect of the experiment on the different combinations of independent variables. Our RQs are:

- *RQ1 Independent Variables*: the EATS and AATS methods. For each of these, different algorithms will be executed.
- *RQ1 Dependent Variables*: The ROUGE score for the output of each algorithm. The results will be averaged in order to have a single comparable measure.

- *RQ2 Independent Variables*: TS techniques that included single and multiple executions of the summary. For each of these, will be executed different algorithms in different combinations.
- *RQ2 Dependent Variables*: The ROUGE score for the output of each algorithm. The results will be averaged in order to have a single comparable measure.

Subjects Selection. For both RQ1 and RQ2, the sampling of the subjects follows the Simple Random Sampling model, where the subjects are randomly chosen from a list of the population. In this case, therefore, the texts to be summarized are randomly chosen from the referenced dataset composed of approximately 287.000 elements. For computational efficiency, each algorithm is run on a block of 1000 texts. Each of these selected texts is submitted to all algorithms, in order to have an accurate comparison of the results on the same input. In the first experiment, a total of 40.000 summaries are executed, so 40 blocks of 1000 texts for each one. In the second experiment, are considered only 1000 texts, due to the computational complexity and the long time required to the conclusion of the experiment.

Design Type Choice and Tools. In this section, is described the test methodology.

- *Principle General Design.* The made choice is to use randomization and balancing techniques. Tests are performed by random blocks of data. For the balancing design principle, each test will be run with a block of 1000 texts to be analyzed. This allows great performances and valid statistical results for each test.
- *Standard Design Type.* For RQ1, is chosen a factor with two treatments as Design Type. Indeed, by these experiments, we want to compare the EATS and AATS methods. Also for RQ2 is chosen the same Design Type, that is a factor with two treatments. In particular, we want to compare the



Figure 1: Boxplot of ROUGE metric scores computed on 1000 summaries by TextRank algorithm.

performance of the summary obtained by a single versus a multiple execution. For each experiment, are used all the considered algorithms. In particular, for the multiple tasks, we consider the execution of an EATS algorithm followed by an execution of an AATS one (and vice versa). For the experiments execution, has been developed a particular software using Python.

3.3 Operation Phase

The experiment operation phase consists of three steps:

Preparation. For the experiment to conduct, in this phase must be checked the correctness of: the code that will extract the random texts from the dataset, the scores of the ROUGE metric and the algorithm setting. It is also important to set up the code for collecting the results. All calculated scores are placed in a dataset containing the average results for each block of summaries.

Execution. The experiment lasted several days, due to the computation time required to run tests. For RQ1, the algorithms worked in parallel, grouped according to the TS methodology and fed by the same input texts. For RQ2 was chosen a sequential computation of the scores. Initially, for both RQs, dataset texts were randomly selected and summarized by various algorithms. Finally, all the summaries were analyzed with the ROUGE metric.

Data Validation. Data validation was done by randomly checking some entries and making sure of the consistency of the CSV file. It was also checked whether the sample's ROUGE score respected the standard expected from the algorithm authors.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

In this section are discussed, analyzed and interpreted the two experiments results, highlighted by some graphs, and finally verifying their statistical validity.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Starting from the hypothesis of same distribution for each block of summaries, since texts are randomly

Table 1: Descriptive statistics.

ROUGE Metric	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
ROUGE-1	0.205	0.194	0.002
ROUGE-2	0.059	0.041	0.002
ROUGE-L	0.204	0.189	0.003

chosen from dataset, below are shown some key features of the achieved results. For this purpose, is analyzed a random execution of TextRank algorithm. Table 1 shows mean, median and standard deviation values for the three types of ROUGE metrics to better understand the subsequent plots.

First of all, it's analyzed the results distribution by a boxplot and a histogram of randomly results. (Each result is referred to a set of 1000 summaries, which differs for algorithm and input text). Figure 1 shows 1000 scores for ROUGE-1, ROUGE-2 and ROUGE-L, taken from the execution of TextRank algorithm.

Figure 2 shows each ROUGE metric distribution by three representative histograms. As anticipated by boxplots, ROUGE-1 and ROUGE-L approximate quite well the normal distribution. This guarantees the good distribution of data points along all the observations, and allows us to consider the mean as a valid representation measure. So, as highlighted, when below is mentioned the ROUGE metric for the evaluation of the experiments, the scores will be referred to the ROUGE-1.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 RQ1 Results

Aim of the first research question was to estimate the effectiveness of the ROUGE metric on evaluating TS algorithms. The comparison was made on the results of both the EATS and AATS methods, on randomly chosen texts by the experiment design guidelines.

For this purpose have been considered 40 blocks, everyone composed of 1000 summaries. To represent results, was made an average within each block and subsequently an overall average for each algorithm. Figure 3 reports the average score for the 7 examined algorithms related to ROUGE metric. The first four (i.e., TextRank, Lsa, Luhn and LexRank) are Extractive, and the last three (i.e., GloVe, Word2Vec, Doc2Vec) are Abstractive. As we can see, the average mean is very close to each algorithm. In general, LexRank is the best performer algorithm, scoring about 10% better than the others. On the other hand, the Abstractive algorithms tend to have very similar values and, even if slightly, all their scores below the mean.

Bert is one of the most innovative TS algorithms in recent years, and it leads to better results. It is available for both the Extractive and the Abstractive approaches and results for each of them are very close.

Table 2 summarizes all the algorithms used in this experiment, reporting the relative mean and standard deviation, for ROUGE metric.



Figure 2: Histogram showing the data distribution for ROUGE-1, ROUGE-2, ROUGE-L scores using TextRank algorithm.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation for all the used algorithms and ROUGE metric.

Algorithm	ROUGE		
Extractive	Mean	Standard deviation	
TextRank	0.205	0.002	
Lsa	0.223	0.004	
Luhn	0.220	0.003	
LexRank	0.242	0.003	
Bert Ext.	0.284	0.099	
Abstractive	Mean	Standard deviation	
Word2Vec	0.213	0.003	
Doc2Vec	0.215	0.002	
GloVe	0.213	0.003	
D . 41	0.000	0.000	
Bert Abs.	0.288	0.099	

A statistical validity test to confirm or reject the hypothesis has been also conducted. To this end, was performed the t-test on the distribution of results for each summary, paired for Abstractive and Extractive. The freedom degrees for this test are equal to the observed population of 40.000 summaries. Test results provide a p-value = 2.2e-16, below the required 0.05 for the experiment's statistical validity. This confirms the alternative hypothesis of equality between the Extractive and Abstractive ROUGE scores.

The tested idea was that Extractive approaches should work much better than Abstractive ones. Results, instead, showed that this assumption is not true. In most cases, both algorithms worked similarly. The reasons can be very different, and confirm the assumption that ROUGE is not a good metric to evaluate TS algorithms. Indeed, remembering that ROUGE



Figure 3: ROUGE average scores of the experiment conducted on Abstractive and Extractive algorithms.

compares a system-generated summary with a human one, and that the score is given by a statistical calculation relating to the N-grams overlapping between the two texts, by this logic the more the summaries use different words, the more the ROUGE metric will perform poorly. But this system does not consider the semantics of sentences. So, the Abstractive methods would be at a strong disadvantage and it could be deduced that algorithms that take random sentences from the original text work very well.

To reinforce the thesis that ROUGE is not much representative, we can also consider the gold standard that is the human-generated summary. It should be the best available summary of a text (and is the optimal target of our algorithms). But if we consider different human-generated summaries, starting from the same source text, the results can be widely different but all valid and acceptable. However, if we calculate the ROUGE score between two gold standards, this would not satisfy us.

ROUGE does not take care of all these considerations and can direct us towards results that do not represent the key quality of a summary. So, the experiments showed that the Abstractive algorithms perform similarly to the Extractive ones, considering the ROUGE score. This confirms that ROUGE can be considered a bad method for evaluating summaries generated by TS algorithms.

4.2.2 RQ2 results

Aim of the second research question was to analyze the achieved results of single versus multiple summary executions. For each block of summaries, is computed the ROUGE score average on both a summary and the total of compared summaries. Two types of multiple execution were considered:

- 1. Extractive algorithms on Abstractive input.
- 2. Abstractive algorithms on Extractive input.

Figure 4 shows the two obtained results. We can clearly note that multiple algorithms executions performed better than single ones almost always. Only exception is for *Bert*, which in both cases obtained



Figure 4: Results comparison for summaries between single computation (blue) and multiple computation (green) for each methodology.

the best scores in single execution (confirmed by the average of the ROUGE score shown in the two plots too).

For both types of experiment is performed a t-test, to ensure the statistical validity. This test was conducted considering the differences between the Extractive and Abstractive methodologies (see Fig. 4). For each test, the multiple execution approach of a summary is compared with the single one. The population is made up of 1000 paired summaries.

Results are quite different one from another: t-test for the Extractive method scored a p-value of 0.4, so there is no statistical validity for this experiment. Instead, t-test for the Abstractive method obtains a pvalue of 0.018, less than the required 0.05 for statistical validity so, in this case, we can confirm the alternative hypothesis, that the multiple execution performs better than the single execution. These results are very interesting, and they shows that the multiple execution method worked better than the single one in all algorithms, except for Bert (see Fig. 4b). A possible explanation can be attributed to the compression ratio obtained from multiple algorithms runs: a first execution can remove redundant information, and a second one compresses key concepts into a better-scoring summary. This demonstrates that the compression ratio has led algorithms to preserve as much information as possible of the original text for putting them in the output summary. On the other hand, Bert produces different results. The average of the achieved score is higher than all the other algorithms. Of course, Bert is actually one of the best approaches that comes from the state of the art in text summarization. It uses a new architecture of a deep neural network, that is far from the other algorithms tested in this experiment. Unlike what was expected, the single execution on Bert performs over 30% compared to the multiple one.

Having a more compressed reference summary can take advantage from the ROUGE score, because the ratio of overlapping N-grams, especially if well selected between two algorithms, can lead to distorted results. In fact, we must think that although the ROUGE score is very good for multiple executions, must be seriously considered also the summary readability. In this experiment, we therefore confirmed the alternative hypothesis. In most cases, multiple runs score better than single ones.

5 THREATS TO VALIDITY

The results validity of an experiment can be compromised by various types of threats: the Conclusion, Internal, Construct and External Validity. In this section we see these threats for RQ1 (extendable to RQ2).

Conclusion Validity. Having comparable results for all experiments successfully closed, there is no threat of *low statistical power*. By the choice of doing a large number of tests for each algorithm with after the computing of results average of each block of summaries, are reduced the *violation hypothesis of statistical tests* and the *random heterogeneity of subjects* and also avoided *Fishing*. Finally the ROUGE metric guarantees the *reliability of the measurements*.

Internal Validity. The experiment results are all reproducible, so there are not risks of *historical and maturation threats*. By an in-depth study of software packages used for tests, are mitigated also the *instrumentation threats*.

Construct Validity. The use of the ROUGE metric allows a numeric comparison, so it neutralizes the *inadequate preoperative explanation of constructs*. Since we are evaluating a special measure for texts summaries quality, is not possible the use of a second metric, so there could be a risk relative to the *mono-method bias* in case of measurement bias². Others threats of this type are not considered because are related to human behaviors.

²"Measurement bias" refers to any systematic or nonrandom error that occurs in a study data collection.

External Validity. For the random selection of the texts to be summarized, is reduced the threat of *interaction of selections and treatments* (that is having a non-representative population sample). The lack of a large calculation power does not allow the use of optimal algorithms for the topic. For this, a series of algorithms was used to have a comparison of their results, reducing the threat of *interaction of settings and treatments*. Finally, the only threat to *interaction of history and treatment* can come from new and more powerful TS methods.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of this paper was to doubt on the validity of the ROUGE evaluation metric for TS algorithms and after, try to understand if a single execution of an algorithm led to better results than a multiple execution one. From our experiments, we deduced that ROUGE is not efficient, and that a multiple execution leads to better results than the single one (also if evaluated by ROUGE). Summing up, a good ROUGE score is not synonymous of good summary quality, if we consider readability and syntactic correctness too.

For future developments, it will be possible to extend the analysis to other algorithms, also if less known. The goal may be to discover new approaches that can directly evaluate the summary quality, avoiding statistical measurements. One idea could be the use of NLP algorithms for text comprehension. Another scenario may be the evaluation of summaries related to a specific topic, training different algorithms with data from a narrow interest field, in order to have interesting and more accurate results.

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