# INFORMATION BOTTLENECK: EXACT ANALYSIS OF (QUANTIZED) NEURAL NETWORKS

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## ABSTRACT

The information bottleneck (IB) principle has been suggested as a way to analyze deep neural networks. The learning dynamics are studied by inspecting the mutual information (MI) between the hidden layers and the input and output. Notably, separate fitting and compression phases during training have been reported. This led to some controversy including claims that the observations are not reproducible and strongly dependent on the type of activation function used as well as on the way the MI is estimated. Our study confirms that different ways of binning when computing the MI lead to qualitatively different results, either supporting or refusing IB conjectures. To resolve the controversy, we study the IB principle in settings where MI is non-trivial and can be computed exactly. We monitor the dynamics of quantized neural networks, that is, we discretize the whole deep learning system so that no approximation is required when computing the MI. This allows us to quantify the information flow without measurement errors. In this setting, we observed a fitting phase for all layers and a compression phase for the output layer in all experiments; the compression in the hidden layers was dependent on the type of activation function. Our study shows that the initial IB results were not artifacts of binning when computing the MI. However, the critical claim that the compression phase may not be observed for some networks also holds true.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Improving our theoretical understanding of why over-parameterized deep neural networks generalize well is arguably one of main problems in current machine learning research (Poggio et al., 2020). Tishby & Zaslavsky (2015) suggested to analyze deep neural networks based on their *Information Bottleneck (IB)* concept, which is built on measurements of *mutual information* (MI) between the activations of hidden layers and the input and target (Tishby et al., 1999), for an overview see Geiger (2020). Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) empirically studied the IB principle applied to neural networks and made several qualitative observations about the training process; especially, they observed a *fitting* phase and a *compression* phase. The latter information-theoretic compression is conjectured to be a reason for good generalization performance and has widely been considered in the literature (Abrol & Tanner, 2020; Balda et al., 2018; 2019; Chelombiev et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2019; Darlow & Storkey, 2020; Elad et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2018; Gabrié et al., 2019; Goldfeld et al., 2019; Jónsson et al., 2020; Kirsch et al., 2020; Tang Nguyen & Choi, 2019; Noshad et al., 2019; Schiemer & Ye, 2020; Shwartz-Ziv & Alemi, 2020; Wickstrøm et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2020). The work and conclusions by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) received a lot of critique, with the generality of their claims being doubted; especially Saxe et al. (2018) argued that the results by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby do not generalize to networks using a different activation function. Their critique was again refuted by the original authors with counter-claims about incorrect estimation of the MI, highlighting an issue with the approximation of MI in both studies.

Our goal is to verify the claims by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby and the critique by Saxe et al. in a setting where the MI can be computed exactly. These studies consider neural networks as theoretical entities working with infinite precision, which makes computation of the information theoretic quantities problematic (for a detailed discussion we refer to Geiger, 2020, see also Section 3). Assuming continuous input distributions, a deterministic network using any of the standard activation functions (e.g., RELU, TANH) can be shown to have infinite MI (Amjad & Geiger, 2019). If an empirical input

distribution defined by a data set $\mathcal{D}$ is considered (as it is the case in many of the previous studies), then randomly-initialized deterministic neural networks with invertible activation functions will most likely result in trivial measurements of MI in the sense that the MI is finite but always maximal, that is, equal to $\log |\mathcal{D}|$ (Goldfeld et al., 2019; Amjad & Geiger, 2019). In order to obtain non-trivial measurements of MI, real-valued activations are usually discretized by *binning* the values, throwing away information in the process. The resulting estimated MI can be shown to be highly dependent on this binning, we refer to Geiger (2020) for a detailed discussion. Instead of approximating the MI in this fashion, we take advantage of the fact that modern computers – and thus neural networks – are discrete in the sense that a floating point value can typically take at most $2^{32}$ different values. Because 32-bit precision networks may still be too precise to observe compression (i.e., information loss), we apply *quantization* to the neural network system to an extent that we can compute informative quantities, that is, we amplify the effect of the information loss due to the discrete computations in the neural network. One may argue that we just moved the place where the discretization is applied. This is true, but leads to a fundamental difference: previous studies applying the discretization post-hoc rely on the in general false assumption that the binned MI approximates the continuous MI well – and thus introduce measurement errors, which may occlude certain phenomena and/or lead to artifactual observations. In contrast, our computations reflect the true information flow in a network during training. Our study confirms that estimation of MI by binning may lead to strong artifacts in IB analyses and shows that:

- Both fitting and compression phases occur in the output SOFTMAX layer.
- For the hidden layers, the fitting phase occurs for both TANH and RELU activations.
- When using TANH in the hidden layers, compression is only observed in the last hidden layer.
- When using RELU, we did not observe compression in the hidden layers.
- Even when applying low precision quantization, more complex networks with many neurons in each layer are observed to be too expressive to exhibit compression, as no information is lost.
- Our setting excludes that the MI approximation is the reason for these different IB dynamics.

The next section introduces the IB concept with a focus on its application to neural networks including the critique and controversy as well as related work. Section 3 discusses issues relating to the estimation of MI, and the idea behind our contribution. Section 4 presents our experiments, results and discussion before we conclude in Section 5.

## 2 THE INFORMATION BOTTLENECK

**Preliminaries.** Given a continuous *random variable (r.v.)* $X$ with density function $p(x)$ and support $\mathcal{X}$, the continuous entropy $\mathrm{H}(X)$ of $X$ is a measure of the *uncertainty* associated with $X$ and is given by $\mathrm{H}(X) = -\int_{\mathcal{X}} p(x) \log p(x) \mathrm{d}x$. Given two r.v.s $X$ and $Y$ with density functions $p(x)$ and $q(y)$ and supports $\mathcal{X}$ and $\mathcal{Y}$, the mutual information $\mathrm{I}(X;Y)$ of $X$ and $Y$ is a measure of the mutual "knowledge" between the two variables. The symmetric $\mathrm{I}(X;Y)$ is given by $\mathrm{I}(X;Y) = \int_{\mathcal{Y}} \int_{\mathcal{X}} p(x,y) \log \frac{p(x,y)}{p(x)p(y)} \mathrm{d}x\mathrm{d}y$. In many cases it is impossible to compute the continuous entropy and MI for continuous r.v.s exactly, due to limited samples or computational limits, or because it may not be finite (Geiger, 2020). Instead, we often estimate the quantities by their discrete counterparts. When $X$ is a discrete r.v., we consider the *Shannon entropy* $\mathrm{H}(X) = -\sum P(x) \log P(x)$. Correspondingly, the mutual information $\mathrm{I}(X;Y)$ of two discrete r.v.s $X$,$Y$, is given by $\mathrm{I}(X;Y) = \sum_{x,y} P(x,y) \log \frac{P(x,y)}{P(x)P(y)}$. We have the following useful identity for both the continuous and discrete MI:

$$\mathrm{I}(X;Y) = \mathrm{H}(X) - \mathrm{H}(X|Y) \ , \tag{1}$$

where $\mathrm{H}(X|Y)$ is the conditional entropy of $X$ given $Y$.

**IB Definition.** The IB method was proposed by Tishby et al. (1999). It is an information theoretic framework for extracting relevant components of an *input* r.v. $X$ with respect to an *output* r.v. $Y$.

These relevant components are found by "squeezing" the information from $X$ through a *bottleneck*, in the form of an r.v. $T$. In other words, $T$ is a compression of $X$. The idea generalizes *rate distortion theory*, in which we wish to compress $X$, obtaining $T$, such that $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$ is maximized subject to a constraint on the expected distortion $d(x,t)$ wrt. the joint distribution $p(x,t)$ (Tishby et al., 1999). In the IB framework, the distortion measure $d$ is replaced by the negative loss in MI between $T$ and the output $Y$, $\mathrm{I}(T;Y)$.

The bottleneck must satisfy the *data processing inequality (DPI)*: $\mathrm{I}(Y;X) \geq \mathrm{I}(Y;T)$, that is, the bottleneck r.v. cannot contain more information about the label than the input.

One drawback of the information bottleneck method is the dependence on the joint distribution, $p(x,y)$, which is generally not known. Shamir et al. (2010) addressed this issue and showed that the MI, the main ingredient in the method, can be estimated reliably with fewer samples than required for estimating the true joint distribution.

**IB In Deep Learning.** Tishby & Zaslavsky (2015) applied the IB concept to neural networks. They view the layers of a *deep neural network (DNN)* as consecutive compressions of the input. They consider the Markov chain

$$Y \to X \to T_1 \to T_2 \to ... \to T_L = \hat{Y} \ ,$$

where $T_i$ denotes the $i$'th hidden layer of the $L$-layer network and $T_L = \hat{Y}$ denotes the output of the network. Again, the bottleneck must satisfy the DPI:

$$\mathrm{I}(Y;X) \geq \mathrm{I}(Y;T_1) \geq \mathrm{I}(Y;T_2) \geq ... \geq \mathrm{I}\left(Y;\hat{Y}\right) \ , \tag{2}$$

$$\mathrm{I}(X;X) \geq \mathrm{I}(X;T_1) \geq \mathrm{I}(X;T_2) \geq ... \geq \mathrm{I}\left(X;\hat{Y}\right) \ . \tag{3}$$

Estimating the MI of continuous variables is difficult (Alemi et al., 2017), as evident from the many different methods proposed (Kraskov et al., 2004; Kolchinsky & Tracey, 2017; Noshad et al., 2019). In the discrete case, $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$ and $\mathrm{I}(T;Y)$ can be computed as

$$\mathrm{I}(X;T) = \mathrm{H}(T) - \mathrm{H}(T|X) = \mathrm{H}(T) \ , \tag{4}$$

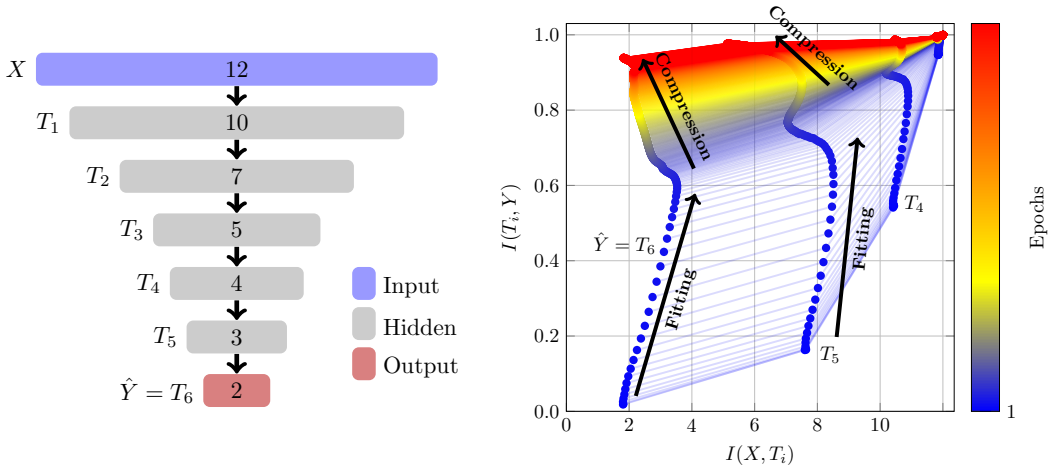
$$\mathrm{I}(T;Y) = \mathrm{I}(Y;T) = \mathrm{H}(T) - \mathrm{H}(T|Y) \ , \tag{5}$$

following from (1) and using in (4) the assumption that $T$ is a deterministic function of $X$. However, for deterministic neural networks the continuous entropies may not be finite (Goldfeld et al., 2019; Saxe et al., 2018; Amjad & Geiger, 2019).

Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) estimate the MI via (4) and (5) by discretizing $T$ and then computing the discrete entropy. They trained a network (shown in Figure 1a) on a balanced synthetic data set consisting of 12-bit binary inputs and binary labels. The network was trained for a fixed number of epochs while training and test error were observed. For every epoch and every layer $T$, The discretization is done by *binning* of $T$: Given upper and lower bounds $b_u, b_l$, and $m \in \mathbb{N}$, we let $B : \mathbb{R} \to [m]$ denote the binning operation, that maps $x \in [b_l, b_u]$ to the index of the corresponding bin from the set of $m$ uniformly distributed bins in $[b_l, b_u]$. Overloading the notation, we apply $B$ directly to a vector in $\mathbb{R}^d$ in order to obtain the resulting vector in $[m]^d$ of bin indices. Using discretized $T' = B(T)$, $\mathrm{I}(X;T')$ and $\mathrm{I}(T';Y)$ are then computed directly by (4) and (5), using estimates of $P(T')$, $P(Y)$ and $P(T'|Y)$ over all samples $\mathcal{D}$ of $X$.

Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby used the TANH activation function for the hidden layers, with $b_l = -1, b_u = 1$ ($b_l = 0$ for the output SOFTMAX layer) and $m = 30$ bins. The estimated $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$ and $\mathrm{I}(T;Y)$ are plotted in the *information plane*, providing a visual representation of the information flow in the network during training (see example in Figure 1b). Based on the obtained results, Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) make several observations; one notable observation is the occurrence of two phases: an *empirical risk minimization* phase and a *compression* phase. The first phase, also referred to as *fitting phase*, is characterized by increasing $\mathrm{I}(T;Y)$ related to a decreasing loss. The subsequent compression phase is characterized by decreasing $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$, and it has been argued that this compression leads to better generalization.

**Critique and Controversy.** The work by Tishby & Zaslavsky (2015) and Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) has jump-started an increasing interest in the IB method for deep learning, with several




(a) (b)

Figure 1: (a) The network used in the standard setting, with the number of neurons in each fully connected layer. The output layer activation function is SOFTMAX, while either TANH or RELU is used for the hidden layers. (b) An example of an information plane for a 6 layer network, with the observed phases marked. Only the last three layers are distinguishable.

papers investigating or extending their contributions, see the review by Geiger (2020). However, as mentioned, their work also received criticism. In particular, the compression phase as a general phenomenon has been called into question. Saxe et al. (2018) published a paper refuting several of the claims made by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017). They based their criticism on a replication of the experiment done by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) where they replaced the bounded TANH activation function with the unbounded RELU activation function. When discretizing, they used the maximum activation observed across all epochs for the upper binning bound $b_u$. The article claims that the two phases observed by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby occurred because the activations computed using TANH saturates close to the boundaries $-1$ and $1$. The claim is supported by experiments using RELU activations and $m = 100$ bins, in which the two phases are not observed.

The critique paper by Saxe et al. was published at ICLR 2018, but started a discussion already during the review process the previous year, when Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby defended their paper in the online discussion forum OpenReview.net[1], posting a response titled "Data falsifying the claims of this ICLR submission all together" (Saxe et al., 2017). The response specifically states that "The authors don't know how to estimate mutual information correctly", referring to Saxe et al. (2018), and goes on to provide an example with a network using RELU activations, which does indeed exhibit the two phases. In response, Saxe et al. performed further experiments using different estimators for MI: a state-of-the-art non-parametric KDE approach (Kolchinsky & Tracey, 2017) and a $k$-NN based estimator (Kraskov et al., 2004). The authors still did not observe the two phases claimed by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby.

Following the discussion on OpenReview.net, several other papers have also commented on the controversy surrounding the information bottleneck. Noshad et al. (2019) presented a new MI estimator EDGE, based on dependency graphs, and tested it on the specific counter example using RELU activations as suggested by Saxe et al. (2018), and they observed the two phases. Table I in the review by Geiger (2020) provides a nice overview over empirical IB studies and if the compression phase was observed (Darlow & Storkey, 2020; Jónsson et al., 2020; Kirsch et al., 2020; Noshad et al., 2019; Raj et al., 2020; Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby, 2017) or not (Abrol & Tanner, 2020; Balda et al., 2018; 2019; Tang Nguyen & Choi, 2019; Shwartz-Ziv & Alemi, 2020; Yu et al., 2020) or the results were mixed (Chelombiev et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2019; Elad et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2018; Gabrié et al., 2019; Goldfeld et al., 2019; Saxe et al., 2018; Schiemer & Ye, 2020; Wickstrøm et al., 2019). In

[1] https://openreview.net/

conclusion, an important part of the controversy surrounding the IB hinges on the estimation of the information-theoretic quantities – this issue has to be solved before researching the information flow.

**Related Work.** The effect of estimating MI by binning has been investigated before, we again refer to Geiger (2020) for a good overview and discussion. Shwartz-Ziv & Alemi (2020) consider infinite ensembles of infinitely-wide networks, which renders MI computation feasible, but do not observe a compression phase. Chelombiev et al. (2019) applies adaptive binning, which, while less prone to issues caused by having the "wrong" number of bins, is still an estimation and thus also suffers from the same problems. Goldfeld et al. (2019) explores IB analysis by use of stochastic neural networks which allow them to show that the compression phase in these noisy networks occurs due to clustering of the hidden representations. While theoretically interesting, the stochastic neural networks are still qualitatively different from deterministic ones and thus not directly applicable in practice. Raj et al. (2020) conducted an IB analysis of binary networks, where both the activations and weights can only be $\pm 1$, which allows for exact computation of MI. The binary networks are significantly different from the networks used in the original studies, whereas applying the IB analysis to quantized versions of networks from these studies allows for a more direct comparison. At a first glance, the work by Raj et al. (2020) could be viewed as taking our approach to the extreme. However, the computations and training dynamics of the binary networks are qualitatively different from our study and the original IB work. For example, the binary networks require modifications for gradient estimation (e.g., Raj et al. consider *straight-through-estimator*, *approximate sign*, and *swish sign*).

## 3 Estimating Entropy and Mutual Information in Neural Networks

The IB principle is defined for continuous and discrete input and output, however continuous MI in neural networks is in general infeasible to compute, difficult to estimate, and conceptually problematic.

### 3.1 Binning and Low Compression in Precise Networks

Consider for a moment a deterministic neural network on a computer with infinite precision. Assuming a constant number of training and test patterns, a constant number of update steps, invertible activation functions in the hidden layers and pairwise different initial weights (e.g., randomly initialized). Given any two different input patterns, two neurons will have different activations with probability one (Goldfeld et al., 2019; Geiger, 2020). Thus, on any input, a hidden layer $T$ will be unique, meaning that, when analysing data set $\mathcal{D}$, all observed values of $T$ will be equally likely, and the entropy $\mathrm{H}(T)$ will be trivial in the sense that it is maximum, that is, $\log |\mathcal{D}|$.

However, when applying the binning $T' = B(T)$, information is dropped, as $B$ is surjective and several different continuous states may map to the same discrete state; for $m$ bins and $d_T$ neurons in $T$ the number of different states of $T'$ is $m^{d_T}$, and thus more inputs from $\mathcal{D}$ will map to the same state. As a consequence, the estimated entropy is decreased. Furthermore, the rate of decrease follows the number of bins; the smaller the number of bins $m$, the smaller the estimated $\mathrm{H}(T)$ (as more values will map to the same state). The entropy $\mathrm{H}(T')$, and therefore $\mathrm{I}(X; T')$ in deterministic networks, is upper bounded by $d_T \log m$. Thus, changing the number of bins used in the estimation changes the results. We also refer to Geiger (2020) for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon[2].

Computations in digital computers are not infinitely precise, a 32-bit floating point variable, for instance, can take at most $2^{32}$ different values. In theory, this means that we can actually consider the states of a neural network discrete and compute the exact MI directly. In practice, we expect the precision to be high enough, that – when using invertible activation functions – the entropy of the layers will be largely uninformative, as almost no information loss/compression will occur. However, using low precision *quantized* neural networks, we can compute the exact MI in the network without $\mathrm{H}(T)$ being trivial – what we regard as the ideal setting to study IB conjectures.

[2]Note that Geiger, in contrast to our terminology, uses *quantizer* or $Q$ to denote post-hoc binning.

### 3.2 EXACT MUTUAL INFORMATION IN QUANTIZED NETWORKS

Quantization of neural networks was originally proposed as a means to create more efficient networks, space-wise and in terms of inference running time, for instance to make them available on mobile devices (Jacob et al., 2018; Hubara et al., 2017). The idea is to use low precision $k$-bit weights (typically excluding biases) and activations, in order to reduce storage and running time. For our use case, we are mainly interested in quantized activations, as they contain the information that is moving through the network.

The naive approach is to quantized after training (*post-training quantization*). In terms of estimating the entropy/MI, this corresponds to applying a binning with $2^k$ bins to the non-quantized activations as done in the previous studies (Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby, 2017; Saxe et al., 2018), as information available to the network at the time of training is dropped, and thus we expect it to show similar artifacts. Instead, we investigate networks trained using *quantization aware training (QAT)*, in which activations are quantized on the fly during training (Jacob et al., 2018). The network is trained using the lower precision, so the MI computed reflects the information in the network at the time of training. QAT works by applying quantization after each layer (after application of the activation function). During training, the algorithm keeps track of the minimum $a_l^{(T)}$ and maximum $a_u^{(T)}$ activations in each layer $T$ across the epoch, and the activation of each neuron in $T$ is mapped to one of $2^k$ uniformly distributed values between $a_l^{(T)}$ and $a_u^{(T)}$, before being passed to the next layer (Jacob et al., 2018). Thus for each epoch, the neurons in a layer $T$ take at most $2^k$ different values, meaning at most $2^{kd_T}$ different states for $T$ (because of the SOFTMAX activation function the effective number of states is $2^{k(d_{\hat{Y}}-1)}$ for the final layer $\hat{Y}$).

## 4 EXPERIMENTS

We conducted the exact bottleneck analysis in two different setups:

- The setting of Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) and Saxe et al. (2018) using the network shown in Figure 1a with either TANH or RELU activations, fitted on the same synthetic data set consisting of $|\mathcal{D}| = 2^{12}$ 12-bit binary input patterns with balanced binary output (Section 4.1).
- Learning a two-dimensional representation for the MNIST handwritten digits, where a fully connected network similar to the one in the previous setting using a bottleneck architecture with RELU activations for all hidden layers is trained (Section 4.2).

For each setting, we applied $k = 8$ bit quantization aware training to the given network. As in previous studies (Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby, 2017; Saxe et al., 2018), we used an 80%/20% training/test split to monitor fitting, while computing the MI based on the entire data set (training and test data). The networks were trained using mini batches of size 256 and the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of $10^{-4}$. Weights of layer $T$ were initialized using a truncated normal with mean 0 and standard deviation $1/\sqrt{d_T}$.

In addition, we also replicated the experiments of Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) and Saxe et al. (2018) using varying number of bins, and we investigated 32- and 4-bit quantization. We also considered analysis of more complex, non-bottleneck architectures for the MNIST data set. These experiments are described in Supplementary Material A, B, C and D.

Our implementation is based on Tensorflow (Abadi et al., 2016). Experiments were run on an Intel Core i9-9900 CPU with 8 3.10GHz cores and a NVIDIA Quadro P2200 GPU.[3]

### 4.1 EXACT MUTUAL INFORMATION FOR SYNTHETIC DATA

The 8-bit quantized network from Figure 1a was fitted for 8000 epochs to the synthetic data set considered in Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017), using either TANH or RELU for the hidden layers. The experiment was repeated 50 times and the means of obtained measurements are reported.

[3]The source code for replicating our experiments is included in the supplementary material.

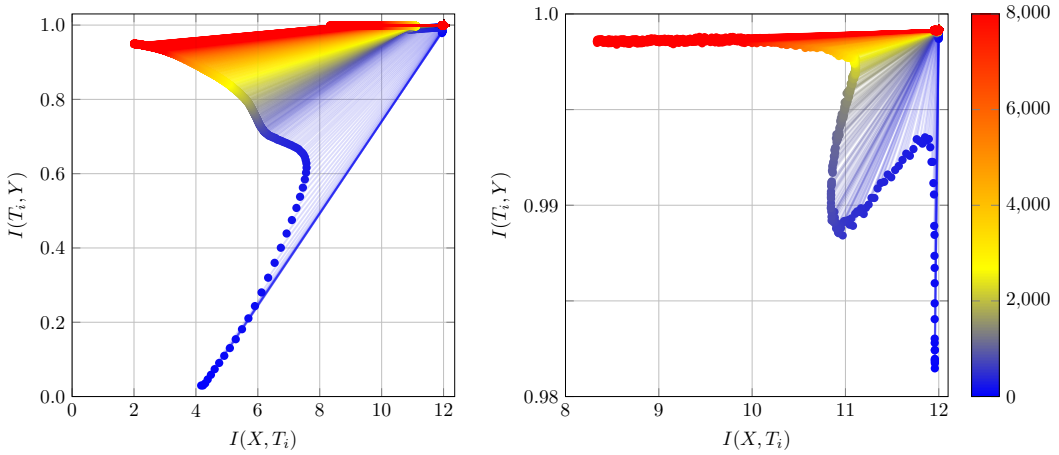



Figure 2: The quantized TANH network, trained in the standard setting with the discrete MI computed exactly. The full information plane (left) and the upper right area (right) are shown. Plotted MI values are the means over the 50 repetitions.

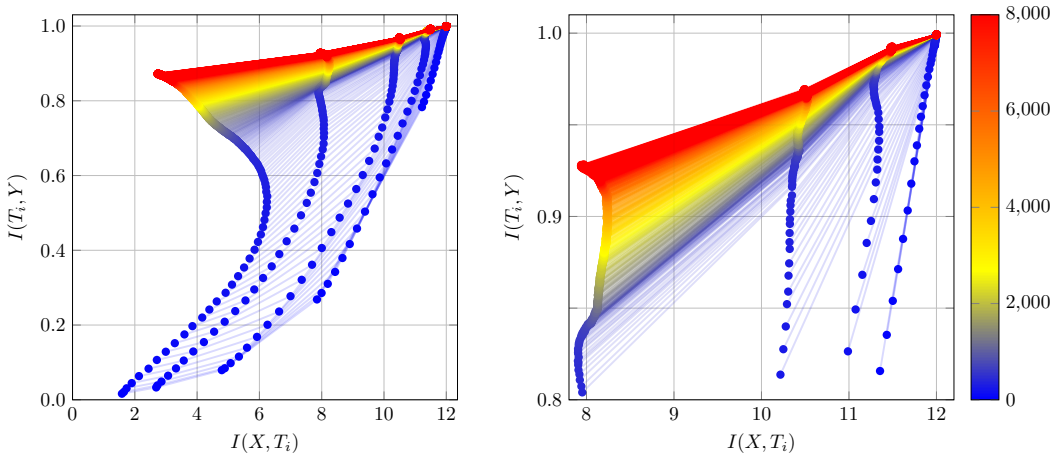



Figure 3: The quantized RELU network, trained in the standard setting with the discrete MI computed exactly. The full information plane (left) and the upper right area (right) are shown. Plotted MI values are the means over the 50 repetitions.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the information planes for the quantized TANH and RELU networks respectively. Both quantized networks obtained good fits with similar accuracies to non-quantized networks; see Figure E.10 and Figure E.11 in the supplementary material.

For the quantized TANH network, the information plane is very similar to the plane obtained in the standard setting using $2^8 = 256$ bins. We clearly observe a fitting and compression phase in the output layer, while $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$ and $\mathrm{I}(T;Y)$ in general are large for the input and hidden layers. Looking at the hidden layer before the output layer, we do observe a fitting and a compression phase, but with the fitting phase interrupted by a small compression phase. For the remaining layers, the MI measurements with input and label remained almost constant throughout the training process.

Likewise, the information plane for the quantized RELU network looks very similar to the plane obtained with binning. The MI is slightly higher, but the most notably difference is the occurrence of a slight increase in $\mathrm{I}(X;T)$ after approximately 1800 epochs, observed only for the hidden layer before the output layer. For the remaining hidden layers, only the fitting phase is observed, with no or very little compression; an observation mirrored in the binning experiments by Saxe et al. (2018).

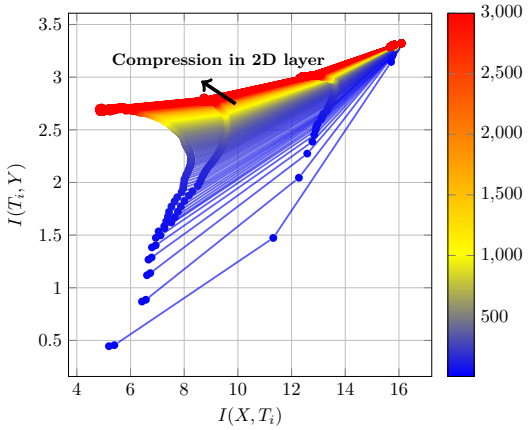



Figure 4: The information plane for the bottleneck structured network fitted on MNIST. Plotted MI values are the means over the 50 repetitions. The compression phase in the 2 neuron layer is highlighted.

### 4.2 Exact Mutual Information for Learning an MNIST Representation

We considered the task of leaning a two-dimensional representation of the MNIST handwritten digits (Bottou et al., 1994; Deng, 2012). We fitted a network with four hidden layers with ReLU activations and 16, 8, 4 and 2 neurons, respectively, where the last two neurons feed into a 10 neuron SoftMax output layer. The network was trained for 3000 epochs, and the experiment was repeated 20 times.

The bottleneck architecture for learning a two-dimensional representation leads to a non-trivial IB analysis. Using more complex networks resulted in trivial, constant maximum mutual information measurements (see Supplementary Material D).

Figure 4 shows the information plane obtained for the network. The network exhibits sub-par performance due to the limiting bottleneck structure, obtaining a maximum accuracy of around 80% (see Figure E.12 in the supplementary material). However, the architecture does admit a non-trivial analysis with a clear fitting phase in the output layer and the three last hidden layers. Small compression phases are also observed in the ReLU layers around 1500 epochs, similar to the last hidden layer of the network trained on synthetic data. The compression indicates that the learnt representations for digits from the same class become more similar.

### 4.3 Discussion

Our experiments largely confirm the findings by Saxe et al. (2018): we observe no compression phase in the quantized ReLU network for the synthetic data. While the quantized networks do not directly correspond to the networks in the original studies (Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby, 2017; Saxe et al., 2018), they amplify the effect of the networks being executed on a digital computer. Note that using quantization (as often done for mobile and edge computing as well as when working on encrypted data) does not violate any assumption in the IB theory – on the contrary, as argued before, it prevents the information theoretic measures from becoming trivial.

The MI generally being higher in our experiments confirms our discussion from Section 3; information is well-preserved through the network. There is no longer a loss of information from the estimation method. All information loss – and hence the dynamics observed – is a result of the neural network learning. Performing the same experiments with the full 32-bit non-quantized networks, this is even more pronounced, as almost no loss of information is observed between layers. This setting approaches the continuous case, in which we would get $H(T) = \log |\mathcal{D}|$ for invertible activation functions. We include information planes for 32-bit networks with exact MI computation in Supplementary Material B. Conversely, when training networks with even lower precision, we see a higher information loss between layers. This can be expected from $H(T) \leq 2^{d_T k}$ and the small, decreasing number $d_T$ of neurons in layer $T$ (see Figure 1b). Using $k = 4$ bit precision, more layers are clearly distinguishable, with results similar to those obtained by estimating MI by binning; however, the

4-bit quantized networks also provide a worse fit – indicating that when estimating MI by binning, information vital to the network is neglected in the analysis. We provide information planes for 4-bit quantized networks in Supplementary Material C.

A similar observation could be made for the network fitted on MNIST. Using the low complexity bottleneck architecture, we obtained non-trivial information measurements. Having only two neurons in the smallest layer limits the network in terms of performance, yielding a sub-optimal accuracy around 80%. Using instead a more complex network with 5 layers with 10 neurons each, we obtained an accuracy over 90% (see Figure E.12), but, even when using 8-bit quantization, the information plane was trivial, with only the last layer discernible (see Supplementary Material D). We observed similar trivial information planes for convolutional architectures, further supporting that only very little information is actually lost in the complex networks (even with quantization), making the information bottleneck, when computed exactly, a limited tool for analysing deep learning.

## 5 Conclusions and Limitations

The experiments and discussion of Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017) and Saxe et al. (2018), as well as several follow-up studies, indicate that *estimating MI by binning may lead to strong artifacts.* We empirically confirmed these issues (see Supplementary Material A): varying the number of bins in the discretization procedure, we observed large differences in the qualitative analysis of the same network, confirming that the results of previous studies highly depend on the estimation method.

To alleviate these issues, we computed the exact MI in quantized neural networks. In our experiments using 8-bit quantized networks, the fitting phase was observed for TANH and RELU network architectures. *The compression phase was observed in the output* SOFTMAX *layer in both cases*. For the TANH network, the MI was only non-trivial for the last two layers, but not for the other hidden layers. *We observed compression in the last hidden layer when using* TANH *activations*; similar to the phase observed by Shwartz-Ziv & Tishby (2017). For the RELU network, the MI was below its upper bound in all layers; however, *no compression was observed in any of the hidden layers using* RELU *activations*. The latter observation confirms the statements by Saxe et al. (2018) about the IB in RELU networks.

Applying the analysis to a network trained on MNIST, we found that a bottleneck architecture learning a low-dimensional representation showed a compression phase. The compression indicates that the learnt representations for digits from the same class become more similar, as intended for representation learning. When applied to networks without a bottleneck (e.g., a simple convolutional architecture), the IB analysis produced only trivial information planes, which shows the limitations of the IB analysis (even with exact computations) for deep learning in practice.

The main contribution of our work is that *we eliminated measurements artifacts from experiments studying the IB in neural networks*. By doing so, future research on the IB concept for deep learning can focus on discussing the utility of the IB principle for understanding learning dynamics – instead of arguing about measurement errors.

The proposed quantization as such is no conceptual limitation, because for invertible activation functions studying a (hypothetical) truly continuous system would lead to trivial results. The biggest limitation of our study is obviously that *we could not (yet) resolve the controversy about the compression phase* (which was, admittedly, our goal), because our experiments confirmed that it depends on the network architecture whether the phase is observed or not. However, the proposed framework now allows for accurate future studies of this and other IB phenomena.

## Reproducibility Statement

In order to allow for easy reproducibility of our experiments, the source code is included in the supplementary material. This includes a README with a description of the code and how to run it, scripts for running the experiments, and scripts for downloading required data: the MNIST data set (Bottou et al., 1994; Deng, 2012), which is publicly available. The code runs well in Linux and Windows.

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