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DisProt: intrinsic protein disorder annotation in 2020.

András Hatos¹, Borbála Hajdu-Soltész², Alexander Miguel Monzon¹, Nicolas Palopoli³, Lucía Álvarez⁴, Burcu Aykac-Fas⁵, Claudio Bassot⁶, Guillermo Ignacio Benítez³, Martina Bevilacqua¹, Anastasia Chasapi⁷, Lucia Chemes^{4,8}, Norman Davey⁹, Radoslav Davidović¹⁰, A. Keith Dunker¹¹, Arne Elofsson⁶, Julien Gobeill¹², Nicolás S. González Foutel⁴, Govindarajan, Sudha⁶, Mainak Guharoy^{13,14}, Tamas Horvath¹⁵, Valentin Iglesias¹⁶, Andrey V. Kajava^{17,18}, Orsolya Panna Kovacs¹⁵, John Lamb⁶, Matteo Lambrughì⁵, Tamas Lazar^{13,14}, Jeremy Y. Leclercq¹⁷, Emanuela Leonardi^{19,20}, Sandra Macedo-Ribeiro²¹, Mauricio Macossay-Castillo^{13,14}, Emiliano Maiani⁵, Jose A. Manso²¹, Cristina Marino-Buslje²², Elizabeth Martínez-Pérez²², Bálint Mészáros², Ivan Mičetić¹, Giovanni Minervini¹, Nikoletta Murvai¹⁵, Marco Necci¹, Christos Ouzounis⁷, Mátyás Pajkos², Lisanna Paladin¹, Rita Pancsa¹⁵, Elena Papaleo^{5,23}, Gustavo Parisi³, Emilie Pasche¹², Pedro José Barbosa Pereira²¹, Vasilis J. Promponas²⁴, Jordi Pujols¹⁶, Federica Quaglia¹, Patrick Ruch¹², Marco Salvatore⁶, Eva Schad¹⁵, Beata Szabo¹⁵, Tamás Szaniszló², Stella Tamana²⁴, Agnes Tantos¹⁵, Nevena Veljkovic¹⁰, Salvador Ventura¹⁶, Wim Vranken^{13,14,25}, Zsuzsanna Dosztányi², Peter Tompa^{13,14,15}, Silvio C. E. Tosatto^{1,*}, Damiano Piovesan¹

¹ Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Padova, Padova, 35121, Italy.

² MTA-ELTE Lendület Bioinformatics Research Group, Department of Biochemistry, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 1117, Hungary.

³ Departamento de Ciencia y Tecnología, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes - CONICET, Bernal, Buenos Aires, B1876BXD, Argentina.

⁴ Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas. Instituto de Investigaciones Biotecnológicas IIBIO, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina

⁵ Computational Biology Laboratory, Danish Cancer Society Research Center, Copenhagen, DK-2100, Denmark

⁶ Department of Biochemistry and Biophysics and Science for Life Laboratory, Stockholm University, Box 1031, Solna, 17121, Sweden

⁷ Biological Computation & Process Laboratory, Chemical Process & Energy Resources Institute, Centre for Research & Technology Hellas, Thessalonica, GR-57500, Greece.

⁸ Departamento de Fisiología y Biología Molecular y Celular (DFBMC), Facultad de Ciencias Exactas y Naturales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina

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⁹ Division of Cancer Biology, The Institute of Cancer Research, Chelsea, London, SW3 6BJ, UK

¹⁰ Laboratory for Bioinformatics and Computational Chemistry, Institute of Nuclear Sciences Vinca, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, 11001, Serbia

¹¹ Center for Computational Biology and Bioinformatics, Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis, 46202, USA

¹² Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics and HES-SO \ HEG, Geneva, 1200, Switzerland

¹³ Structural Biology Brussels, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels, 1050, Belgium

¹⁴ VIB-VUB Center for Structural Biology, Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), Brussels, 1050, Belgium

¹⁵ Institute of Enzymology, Research Centre for Natural Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, H-1117, Hungary

¹⁶ Departament de Bioquímica i Biologia Molecular and Institut de Biotecnologia i Biomedicina, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 08193, Spain

¹⁷ Centre de Recherche en Biologie cellulaire de Montpellier (CRBM), UMR 5237 CNRS, Université Montpellier, Montpellier, 34293, France

¹⁸ Institut de Biologie Computationnelle(IBC), Montpellier, 34095, France

¹⁹ Department of Woman and Child Health, University of Padova, Padova, 35127, Italy

²⁰ Fondazione Istituto di Ricerca Pediatrica (IRP), Città della Speranza, Padova, 35127, Italy

²¹ Instituto de Biologia Molecular e Celular (IBMC) and Instituto de Investigação e Inovação em Saúde (i3S), Universidade do Porto, Porto, 4200-135, Portugal

²² Bioinformatics Unit. Fundación Instituto Leloir, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, C1405BWE, Argentina

²³ Translational Disease Systems Biology, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Protein Research University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, DK-2200, Denmark

²⁴ Bioinformatics Research Laboratory, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, CY 1678, Cyprus

²⁵ Interuniversity Institute of Bioinformatics in Brussels (IB2), ULB-VUB, Brussels, 1050, Belgium

*Corresponding author: silvio.tosatto@unipd.it

Abstract

The Database of Protein Disorder (DisProt, URL: www.disprot.org) provides manually curated annotations of intrinsically disordered proteins from the literature. Here we report recent

1 developments with DisProt (version 8), including the doubling of protein entries, a new
2 disorder ontology, improvements of the annotation format and a completely new website. The
3 website includes a redesigned graphical interface, a better search engine, a clearer API for
4 programmatic access and a new annotation interface that integrates text mining technologies.
5 The new entry format provides a greater flexibility, simplifies maintenance and allows the
6 capture of more information from the literature. The new disorder ontology has been
7 formalized and made interoperable by adopting the OWL format, as well as its structure and
8 term definitions have been improved. The new annotation interface has made the curation
9 process faster and more effective. We recently showed that new DisProt annotations can be
10 effectively used to train and validate disorder predictors. We believe the growth of DisProt will
11 accelerate, contributing to the improvement of function and disorder predictors and therefore
12 to illuminate the “dark” proteome.
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23 INTRODUCTION

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25 About 20 years ago, the concept of the intrinsic structural disorder of proteins came into
26 being(1, 2). Since then, the field has reached adulthood, with the concept of protein disorder
27 gaining wide acceptance in the community. Intrinsically disordered proteins/regions
28 (IDPs/IDRs) are now often being referred to without a citation, the term having become as
29 common as the “globular” structure of a protein, or the “active site” of an enzyme. Yet, the
30 field is still accelerating and has not reached its climax, as signaled by several recent
31 breakthroughs and high-impact stories (3, 4).
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38 For example, it was recently recognized by “omics” data analyses that about half of eukaryotic
39 proteins are “dark”, in the sense that we have no information on their 3D structure (5), which
40 poses a serious bottleneck in their functional characterization and annotation. Similarly, only
41 45% of the residues of all human proteins are covered by multiple sequence alignment-based
42 Pfam-A protein family annotations (6). These values suggest that only a vague notion about
43 the structure and function of the majority of proteins in our databases. As a significant fraction
44 of the dark proteome and non-Pfam annotated proteins and protein regions are intrinsically
45 disordered (the concepts having become almost synonymous), our best approach for
46 illuminating the dark proteome is to predict disorder from sequence, and experimentally
47 characterize the underlying structural ensembles (7).
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57 The prediction of protein disorder from sequence was on the menu of the Critical Assessment
58 of Protein Structure Prediction (CASP), a community-wide experiment of predicting protein
59 structures from sequence (8), for many years. A new initiative, the Critical Assessment of
60 Intrinsic protein Disorder (CAID), has now reached maturity and will be reintegrated into the

1 CASP programme, with a clearer IDP perspective. New annotations in DisProt have already
2 been used to provide a blind evaluation of disorder predictors (9).
3

4 Several recent breakthroughs have also signaled the vitality of the field. An unsettled question
5 with IDPs/IDRs is whether their structural disorder persists in the crowded interior of cells.
6 Whereas diverse indirect evidence indicates that this is the case (10), only in-cell NMR seems
7 currently available to address this issue. For example, it was recently applied to study
8 Parkinson's disease protein α -synuclein (DisProt DP00070), once suggested to have folded,
9 oligomeric structure in cells (11). In-cell NMR has clearly shown that α -synuclein preserves
10 its disordered, monomeric state in non-neuronal and neuronal cells alike (12).
11

12 Another aspect of the functionality of IDPs is that they often mediate protein-protein
13 interactions, mostly by folding upon partner binding (13), but sometimes by preserving their
14 structural disorder (fuzziness) in the bound state (14). This was recently shown to occur in the
15 extremely tight (picomolar) interaction between two human IDPs, histone H1 (DisProt
16 DP01156) and its nuclear chaperone, prothymosin- α (DisProt DP01677). These proteins
17 associate while retaining their highly dynamic, fully disordered state (15). Functional
18 regulation of another type may also arise from structural disorder, via the entropic force
19 generated by the structural ensemble of an IDP/IDR. In the enzyme UDP- α -D-glucose-6-
20 dehydrogenase (UGDH, DisProt DP02338), the C-terminal disordered tail has such a role, fine-
21 tuning the energy landscape of the protein and stabilizing a sub-state that has a high affinity for
22 an allosteric inhibitor (16, 17).
23

24 It is without doubt that we cannot afford to ignore this intrinsically disordered, yet functionally
25 important part of the proteome. Not only does structural disorder play an exquisite role in
26 cellular signaling and regulation (18), it is also often implicated in disease (19, 20).
27 Consequently, IDPs also represent important drug targets: a largely unexplored frontier in
28 developing molecular medicine is the rational design of drugs against IDPs (21).
29

30 Due to these challenges, it is important to update and upgrade DisProt, the primary database of
31 protein disorder. Whereas predicted disorder features are available in MobiDB (18), which has
32 recently been integrated in UniProtKB (22), the crux of understanding protein disorder is the
33 availability of manually curated, experimentally verified disorder annotations. The previous
34 release of the database, DisProt 7 (23), held data of about 800 entries of IDPs/IDRs. Other
35 databases, like IDEAL (22), ELM (24), DIBS (25) and MFIB (26), also include curated
36 disorder information but are somehow different capturing specific functional aspects, or protein
37 classes, and the overlap with DisProt is minimal (27). To reflect on the above-noted
38 breakthroughs and the recent explosion of the related liquid-liquid phase separation (LLPS)
39 field (28), we present a significant update and upgrade of the DisProt database, which is now
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1 at version 8. DisProt 8 holds almost two-times as many entries as DisProt 7, including the
2 majority of those available in aforementioned databases.
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4 DisProt has been completely redesigned with an extended and updated functional classification
5 scheme that relies on functional/structural aspects of annotated regions and incorporates a
6 novel functional class “biological condensation”. Annotation concepts have been formalized
7 in a new Disorder Ontology (DO), which is maintained by the entire DisProt community.
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11 DisProt 8 also has many novel features that make it easier to search. The graphical interface
12 has been redesigned and a new entry format provides greater flexibility, simplifies maintenance
13 and allows the capture of more information from the literature.
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17 Lastly, we made significant improvements on the new annotation interface used by DisProt
18 curators to populate the database. It is now easier to use and leverages curators’ work by
19 exploiting text-mining technologies, integrating third-party information on-the-fly and
20 implementing several validation checks.
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25 In recent work, specific sequence features have been associated with different disorder
26 “flavours” and mapped on a large scale (29). This information has been used to improve protein
27 function prediction from sequence (30). We believe the growth of DisProt will accelerate,
28 contributing to the improvement of function and disorder predictors and therefore to illuminate
29 the “dark” proteome.
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36 PROGRESS AND NEW FEATURES

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40 Database structure and implementation

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43 The way disorder information is represented in the literature is inherently complex. Articles
44 describe functional and structural aspects, where IDPs are strictly connected to dynamic
45 behavior. DisProt tries to capture as much biological knowledge as possible while at the same
46 time providing simple and clear annotations. The idea is to optimize user experience and
47 improve data exchange with other major annotation resources.
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52 Database Records

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56 The major change compared to the previous release is the new annotation paradigm. In DisProt
57 7 experimental methods represented the annotation core of a DisProt region and function terms
58 were used as attributes. Now the core of an annotation is the functional/structural aspect of a
59 region and the experimental method is an attribute representing the quality of the annotation.
60

1 Both functional/structural aspects and the type of evidence are encoded in a controlled
2 vocabulary, in line with other core data resources (e.g., UniProtKB).
3

4 In the new DisProt region format a “statement” field has been introduced to track the literature
5 text supporting the evidence. When the text is too long or complicated, a curator statement is
6 provided instead. All “statements” are available from the website and could be used to train
7 text-mining algorithms and to highlight sentence-based annotations on abstracts and full text
8 articles.
9

10 At present, functional terms can be associated to a subset of disordered residues, i.e. to a region
11 shorter than the one for which disorder has been experimentally evaluated. For example, a
12 paper describing a folding upon binding event can provide two DisProt records, one region
13 spanning the folding residues and another showing the interacting ones. All regions have now
14 a region identifier field which is unique and stable, i.e. it is never reused and becomes obsolete
15 if the reference sequence changes. Functional and structural vocabulary terms along with
16 experimental methods have been encoded in a new Disorder Ontology (DO).
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27 Disorder Ontology

28 In order to describe the different functional aspects of IDPs and the experimental methods used
29 to characterize them, an annotation scheme was introduced in DisProt 7. A more formalized
30 version of the disorder ontology was implemented in DisProt 8, to move towards a descriptive,
31 interoperable and collaborative ontology of IDPs. This is the first release of the Disorder
32 Ontology in the specific Biomedical Ontology (OBO) or the Web Ontology Language (OWL)
33 formats (31, 32). Besides improving the ability to reuse and share the ontology, these formats
34 allow definition of label attributes such as ‘xterm’ (cross-references to external databases or
35 ontologies) and ‘synonym EXACT’ (alternative names). They also support assignment of
36 relationships among terms (including for example ‘disjoint_from’ to mark terms that should
37 not be linked together).
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48 An identifier was assigned to each term in the ontology. It gives each label an 8-character
49 accession code (e.g., “DO:00001”), with the string “DO:” to indicate the disorder ontology and
50 five numeric characters to indicate the term unambiguously. Mirroring the Gene Ontology,
51 accession numbers are assigned incrementally and there is no relationship between accession
52 codes and the ontology topology.
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58 We have reviewed the terms and organization of the whole ontology, paying particular
59 attention to the “Function” category. We made some straightforward changes, for example, we
60 split “Fatty acylation (myristoylation and palmitoylation)” into a renamed parent class “Fatty
acylation” and its new children terms “Myristoylation” and “Palmitoylation”. A new functional

1 term was also introduced to annotate different phenomena related to “Biological condensation”
2 (DO:00040). It describes proteins that undergo phase separation from a solution, e.g., either to
3 form a dynamic liquid droplet (DO:00041, “Liquid-liquid phase separation”) or a hydrogel
4 (DO:00042). It also includes cellular protein condensates (DO:00045 and DO:00046 describe
5 “Granule” and “Cellular puncta”, respectively), regardless of their existence in physiological
6 or pathological states (as in “Amyloid”, DO:00046). This class provides an initial scheme to
7 annotate the relevant but still scarce information available about protein condensates, and we
8 expect this subset of the hierarchy to be modified (possibly by conforming its own sub-
9 ontology) as the field matures.

10 The distinction between structural states and dynamic events, like disorder-to-order transitions,
11 has been made clearer. Previously “Structural state” terms were part of the “Structural
12 transition” category and “Disorder” was only used implicitly. Now, a new “Structural state”
13 category has been created and it includes “Disorder”, “Order”, “Pre-molten globule” and
14 “Molten globule” terms. In the future, structural states will be annotated in conjunction with
15 the corresponding environmental conditions affecting the conformation (pH, Post-translational
16 modifications (PTMs), temperature, etc.).

17 All experimental methods are now encoded under the “Detection method” branch. An overlap
18 with other ontologies exists, but it is not complete or the definition of the same experiment is
19 often slightly different. For example, in DisProt the term “Crystallography” includes “Missing
20 electron density” as a child. In other ontologies “Crystallography” always indicates methods
21 for structural determination. A new “Electron cryomicroscopy” (DO:00128) term has been also
22 introduced in DisProt 8.

23 The Disorder Ontology (version 0.1.0) is maintained by the DisProt consortium and is available
24 to be adopted by other databases for general use. In the future it will be made available also
25 from third party dedicated repositories.

26 Curation process and updates

27 DisProt data is provided by a community effort and annotations are collected through a web
28 interface, which has been improved drastically compared to the previous version in terms of
29 field validation, autocompletion and Named Entity Recognition (NER). In particular, curators
30 can use a dedicated service from the NextA⁵ literature triage infrastructure (33) to rank relevant
31 literature starting from a gene name. In complement, when curators start from an article, the
32 DisProt interface exploits the SciLite software through the EuropePMC API (34) to
33 automatically retrieve biological entities and identifiers in the manuscript.

1 The annotation interface implements the concept of ownership and user privileges. DisProt
2 distinguishes two types of users, curators and reviewers. Curators can edit only entries that they
3 have created, while reviewers can modify all entries. Before release the reviewers check all
4 annotations to ensure high quality of the data. Curators are experts in the field and trained to
5 meet DisProt annotation standards.
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10 Access to the annotation interface is restricted to registered curators and provided through
11 Google Authentication (based on the OAuth 2.0 protocol) or the ELIXIR authentication and
12 authorization infrastructure system (35). In the past the DisProt interface had been kept open
13 for limited time slots. Now the new DisProt interface is always open and new releases will be
14 delivered more frequently.
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19 DisProt versioning has been improved. A numeric identifier indicates the version of the
20 database entry, e.g., version “8.0”, and a “<year>_<month>” code indicates the version
21 (timestamp) of annotated data, e.g., “2019_09”.
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26 Database content

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29 Since the last release, both the number of proteins and regions has almost doubled. DisProt 8
30 contains 1,556 proteins and 3,511 sequence segments annotated as disordered, which cover
31 19.7% of the number of residues. These numbers become 1,390 proteins, 3,041 regions and
32 18.7% of disorder content when ambiguous evidence is not considered. Previous annotations
33 have been fixed and updated. Regions shorter than ten residues are no longer allowed and
34 existing short regions were marked as obsolete. Regions ending outside the sequence, regions
35 with a start index of zero instead of one and entries for which the reference sequence in
36 UniProtKB changed, were corrected and, when necessary, new records were created manually.
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44 Figure 1 shows the distribution of regions based on their length and experimental detection
45 method. Compared to the previous version, the distribution shape has not changed. Secondary
46 methods, which include all “Detection methods” terms except “Missing electron density”
47 (DO:00130) and “Nuclear magnetic resonance” (DO:00120) dominate experiments used to
48 identify longer (>100 residues) regions.
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54 The statistics on annotation data for the main branches of the disorder ontology are reported in
55 Figure 2. Only terms one node away from the ontology root are considered and more specific
56 annotations are propagated following the “true path rule”, i.e. following the ontology hierarchy,
57 so that parent terms account for children counts.
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Different ontology aspects are shown with different colors. In red the “Structural state” terms
show as the majority of region records in DisProt are annotated as disordered. Only 5 proteins

1 are annotated with the “Order” term. In the future, curators will be encouraged to also track
2 information about order, in particular when relevant for structural transitions. Transitions are
3 mainly covering folding events (“Disorder to order”), 365 proteins and 36,200 residues, and
4 not the contrary. The majority of interaction partner annotations refers protein and nucleic acid
5 binding. Binding residues are, however, overestimated since in the previous DisProt version,
6 due to hard constraints in the database schema, it was not possible to narrow region boundaries
7 to real interacting positions. Binding positions will become more precise in the future. The new
8 term introduced in DisProt 8, “Biological condensation” (DO:00040) has been assigned to a
9 total of 20 proteins, 29 regions and 2,610 residues. The new “Electron cryomicroscopy”
10 (DO:00128) term, which is a child of “Crystallography”, covers 34 proteins, 67 regions and
11 4,726 residues.

12 Darker segments in Figure 2 indicate the fraction of proteins (left plot) and residues (right plot)
13 for which more than one experimental evidence is available. At the bottom in orange the
14 distribution of “Detection methods” terms. “Proteins” and “Residues” distributions have a
15 similar shape. “Crystallography”, which is a parent of “Missing electron density”, covers less
16 residues compared to “Spectrometry” and “Optical analysis”, indicating that regions identified
17 with crystallographic techniques are shorter on average. Moreover, “Crystallography” has less
18 residues covered by multiple experimental evidence compared to other techniques. In general,
19 disorder annotation is well supported with 44.4% of disordered proteins and 43.2% of the
20 disordered residues backed by two or more literature references.

21 DisProt website

22 The DisProt website has been completely redesigned, improving the user experience,
23 visualization and functionalities. Additionally, a big effort was made to develop the DisProt
24 Application Programming Interface (API) to enable users to retrieve a single entry or a region
25 and to perform advanced searches via RESTful endpoints (URLs).

26 Entry page

27 The entry page is composed of three main sections. On the top, general information of the
28 protein including name, DisProt ID, organism, sequence length, MobiDB and UniProtKB
29 accession numbers are provided. On the top right, it is possible to select the DisProt version
30 and hide/show ambiguous/obsolete evidence. A download dropdown button allows saving the
31 whole entry data in JSON, TSV (tab-separated) or the corresponding sequence in FASTA
32 format.

1 A new dynamic feature viewer allows to visualize DisProt evidence mapped onto sequence.
2 The feature viewer shows two tracks by default, DisProt consensus and domains, the latter
3 including Pfam (36) and Gene3D (37) annotation. DisProt consensus is generated by merging
4 region annotation following the hierarchy of the ontology terms. In the last step, when merging
5 the four main ontology branches, priority is given to “Interaction partner”, “Structural
6 transition”, “Structural state” and “Disorder function”, respectively.
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11 The feature viewer can be expanded to see sub tracks and it is possible to zoom in and out
12 specific regions, customize the view and download a high quality image. Region tooltips are
13 activated on mouse over and provide detailed information about the corresponding annotation.
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17 Region details are also provided on the bottom of the page, organized in a dynamic list of
18 boxes. A search box, which supports regular expressions, allows to filter the list of regions.
19 The filter is also applied to the feature and sequence viewers (right) in real time, for example,
20 by typing “nuclear magnetic resonance” it is possible to select only region evidence from NMR
21 experiments.
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26 27 Browsing and searching data 28

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30 DisProt implements both a database and a BLAST search (38), both available from the
31 “Browse” page. The database search allows to compose a query against several fields, which
32 can be combined to meet multiple criteria. All search fields accept regular expressions, and
33 “Free text” allows to search against the entire database content. For example, by searching
34 “p53” in “Free text” and “homo | mus” in “Organism” will return all human and mouse proteins
35 with the “p53” string somewhere in the corresponding database records (protein name,
36 annotation reference title, etc.). Query results are displayed in the table below the search box.
37 Table columns are customizable and the result can be downloaded in JSON, TSV or FASTA
38 format.
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46 47 DisProt API 48

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50 DisProt provides programmatic access to perform a search through REpresentational State
51 Transfer (or RESTful) Web Service API. A single entry or evidence can be retrieved by using
52 DisProt or UniProtKB identifiers. Additionally, a text search against the entire database can be
53 performed by specifying query fields (name, organism, etc.) directly as URL parameters in the
54 HTTP request. JSON, TSV and FASTA formats are supported.
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CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In the previous release, DisProt disorder annotations were polished and major errors were fixed but the number of newly annotated proteins was limited. In DisProt 8, disorder annotations doubled and a robust infrastructure has been put in place to leverage and accelerate the annotation process. The database format has been improved to be flexible enough to capture essential information from the literature but, at the same time, keeping disorder representation simple and clear. A new disorder ontology has been formalized with the aim of improving maintenance and data exchange with core data resources. The new ontology is versioned and provides a hierarchy to facilitate term traversal. Article sentences tracking statements about disorder experimental evidence are now captured providing a corpus for the implementation of new text-mining models. New protein examples are used as ground-truth to evaluate prediction methods as in the Critical Assessment of Disorder Annotation (CAID). DisProt long term sustainability is guaranteed by the centrality of DisProt in several initiatives involving large communities of bioinformaticians working on disorder, such as the IDPfun Marie Curie RISE and the ELIXIR IDP User Community.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. Distribution of region length. Regions shorter than 100 residues (left) are binned in groups of 10 residues. Regions longer than 100 (right) are binned in 100 residues. The tick labels indicate the lower bound which is included. Gray bars refer to the previous release (DisProt 7).

Figure 2. Distribution of disorder annotation terms. Terms belong to the Disorder Ontology and only those one node away from the ontology root are shown. Annotation counts for child terms are propagated to parents up to the root. The dark segments correspond to proteins (left) or residues (right) for which more than one piece of evidence is available.

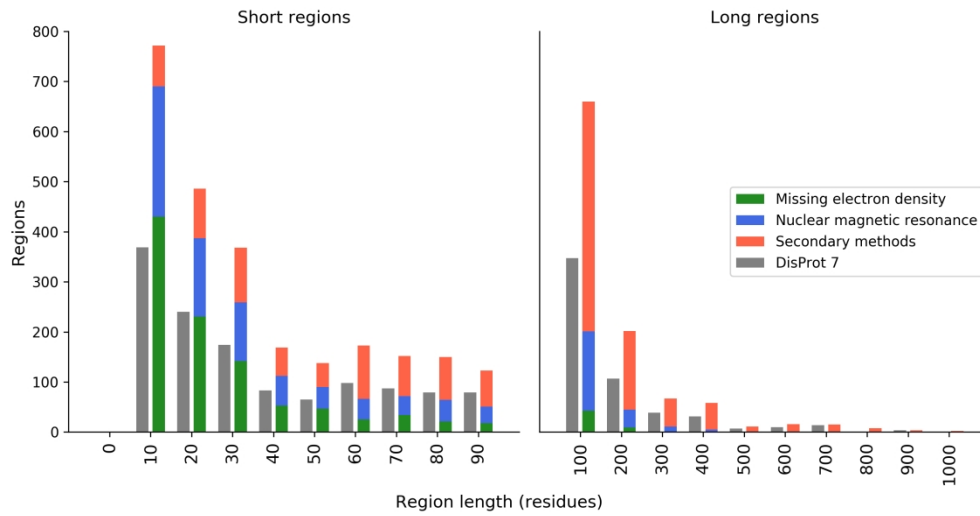


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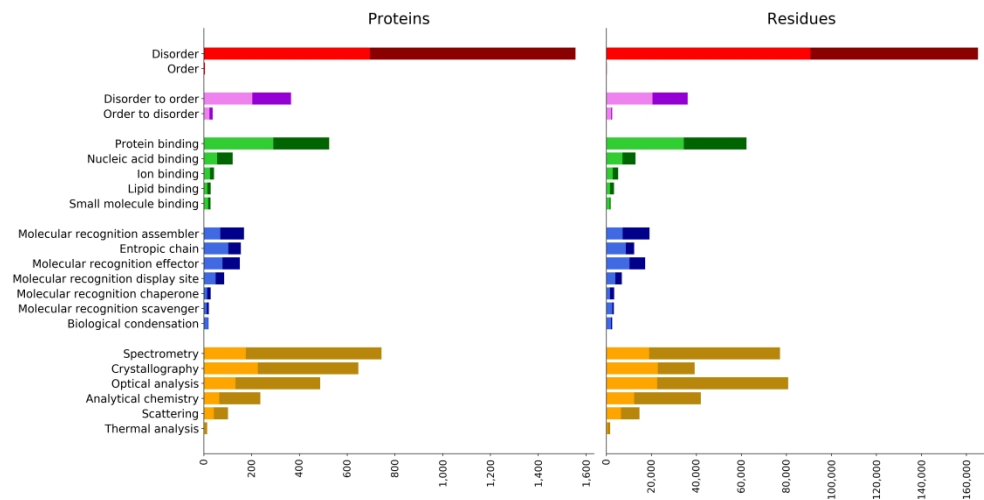


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