Unveiling the Spectrum of Data Contamination in Language Models: A Survey from Detection to Remediation

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Abstract

Data contamination has garnered increased attention in the era of large language models (LLMs) due to the reliance on extensive internet-derived training corpora. The issue of training corpus overlap with evaluation benchmarks—referred to as contamination—has been the focus of significant recent research. This body of work aims to identify contamination, understand its impacts, and explore mitigation strategies from diverse perspectives. However, comprehensive studies that provide a clear pathway from foundational concepts to advanced insights are lacking in this nascent field. Therefore, we present the first survey in the field of data contamination. We begin by examining the effects of data contamination across various stages and forms. We then provide a detailed analysis of current contamination detection methods, categorizing them to highlight their focus, assumptions, strengths, and limitations. We also discuss mitigation strategies, offering a clear guide for future research. This survey serves as a succinct overview of the most recent advancements in data contamination research, providing a straightforward guide for the benefit of future research endeavors.

1 Introduction

Data contamination refers to the accidental or deliberate inclusion of evaluation or benchmark data in the training phase of language models, resulting in artificially high benchmark scores (Schaeffer, 2023). This issue, while longstanding—stemming from the foundational ML principle of separating training and test sets—has garnered increased attention with the advent of large language models (LLMs). These models are trained on vast corpora sourced from the web (OpenAI, 2023; Touvron et al., 2023a), heightening the risk that training data may inadvertently encompass instances from evaluation benchmarks (Brown et al., 2020; Chowdhery et al., 2022; Touvron et al., 2023a,b). Such contamination of evaluation benchmarks can obscure the true generalization performance of LLMs, as it might artificially inflate benchmark scores by testing the models' ability to "memorize" and "recall" rather than "reason" or "generalize".

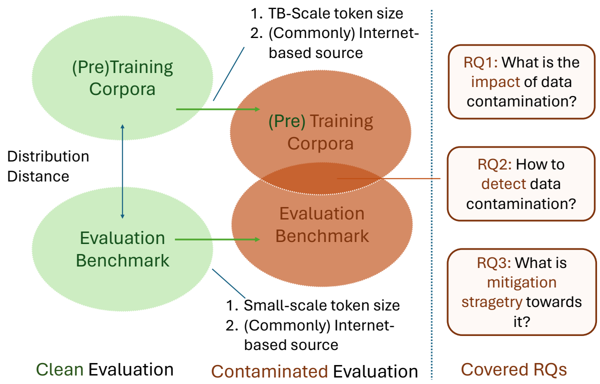

Figure 1: Basic illustration of data contamination and the research questions related to it. Clean evaluation is defined as having no overlap between the pretraining corpora and the benchmarks, and contaminated evaluation is defined as significant overlap between it.

Given the increasing concerns regarding potential contamination of evaluation benchmarks and its broader impact on downstream task performance recently, numerous studies have aimed at identifying and mitigating data contamination in these benchmarks, and understanding its impact on our perception of model capabilities. Research on data contamination could be broadly categorized into two main areas: (i) investigations of models trained with open-source data, and (ii) studies relevant to models developed using proprietary data. Generally, having access to training data, or the lack thereof, has a profound influence on modern contamination research.

In this paper, we present the very first comprehensive analysis of the growing field of data contamination detection and mitigation. Our objective is to delve into the downstream impacts of data

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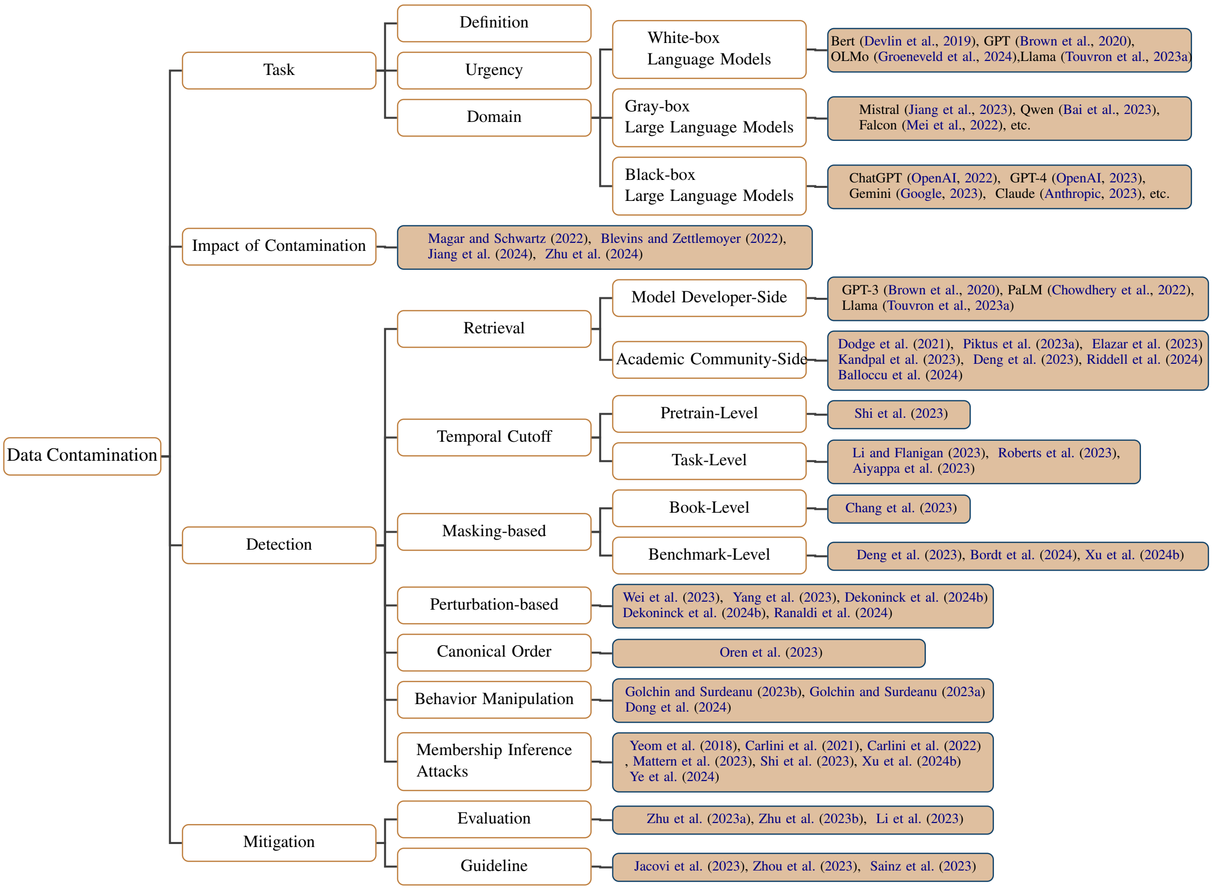

Figure 2: Taxonomy of research on Data Contamination in large language models that consists of the task, effect, detection and mitigation.

contamination, investigate existing methods for detecting data contamination, and discuss a range of mitigation strategies. The paper is structured as outlined in Figure 1. We start by establishing the background of data contamination (§2) and discussing the effect of contamination (§3). Following this, We provide a detailed analysis of current methods for detecting data contamination (§4). We categorize these methods and critically examine the assumptions each relies on, highlighting their the prerequisites and limitation for their application. Subsequently, we explore strategies for mitigating data contamination (§5), tackling potential hurdles and proposing avenues for future investigations in this domain. Together with concurrent studies on data contamination (Ravaut et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024a), this paper aims to furnish NLP researchers with an in-depth, systematic understanding of data contamination issues, thereby making a significant contribution to enhancing the integrity of evaluations in the field[1].

[1]The related materials at https://github.com/yale-nlp/lm-contamination-survey.

2 Background

To provide a comprehensive understanding of data contamination, this section delves into its definition, the urgency of addressing it, and its implications across different types of language models.

What is data contamination? Data contamination occurs when benchmark or test set data are inadvertently included in the training phase. This issue is particularly relevant when evaluating LLMs that have been partially trained with a test set from a benchmark, potentially leading to an inflated performance score. This phenomenon, known as data contamination, is critical for ensuring fairness and unbiased evaluation in modern LLMs.

Significance of studying contamination Thorough and complete evaluation of LLM capabilities has remained a largely unsolved problem, with benchmark contamination playing a critical role in achieving a comprehensive assessment of LLM capabilities. Contamination is a significant aspect of model evaluations. In traditional NLP and ML, it was easy to separate training and testing data, allowing for evaluating models' generalization capabilities to new data (Suhr et al., 2020; Talmor and Berant, 2019; Lake and Baroni, 2018). However, with web-scale training data of LLMs and their enormous size in terms of number of parameters, such clear separation has become very difficult. Thus contamination of evaluation benchmarks has led to, at best, an incomplete understanding and, at worst, a misleading assessment of the true capabilities of LLMs. The risk of data contamination increases when the benchmarks for evaluating these models are derived from the same web sources used for training. This creates a potential overlap between training data and evaluation benchmarks, leading to concerns over the validity and fairness of model comparisons.

Language model types in data contamination
(1) *White-box Language Models*: The white-box language model refers to the model whose internal workings, such as the model architecture, parameters, and training data, are transparent and interpretable, allowing for a deeper understanding and analysis of its behavior. In the realm of data contamination, the focus often centers on models like BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019), or larger models like OLMo (Groeneveld et al., 2024), to examine the *impacts of contamination* (§3). This involves exploring the correlation between the contaminated data and downstream task performance from the perspective of how well these models memorize and are influenced by the contaminated input.
(2) *Gray-box Language Models*: The gray-box language model is a type of language model that provides some level of transparency and interpretability into its internal workings, such as revealing certain architectural components or allowing limited access to its training data, while still maintaining a degree of opacity or abstraction over other aspects of the model. This typically refer to large-scale models, such as Llama (Touvron et al., 2023a,b), Mistral (Jiang et al., 2023), Qwen (Bai et al., 2023), and Phi-3 (Abdin et al., 2024). Although the extent of openness varies among these models, they are generally characterized by their accessibility. This accessibility facilitates extensive research into their architectures and training datasets, enabling the development and validation of innovative methodologies within the field.
(3) *Black-box Language Models*: Black-box LLMs often refer to proprietary models such as ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2022), Claude (Anthropic, 2023), and Gemini (Google, 2023). The defining feature of these models is the inaccessibility of their training corpora to researchers, making it challenging to investigate data contamination. Consequently, many recent studies have focused on developing methods to address this issue (Golchin and Surdeanu, 2023b; Deng et al., 2023).

3 Impacts of contamination

The contamination effect refers to the extent to which a model, exposed to contaminated data during its training phase, is influenced by this data in its performance on downstream tasks. Research in this area typically involves selecting a base model and a fixed pretraining corpus, while varying mixture of contaminated data (Magar and Schwartz, 2022; Jiang et al., 2024). This approach allows for observing how changes in the data mix affect downstream task performance. Additionally, this area of research is often connected with evaluating the models' ability to memorize information and recall their parametric knowledge (Geva et al., 2021, 2023; Haviv et al., 2023; Srivastava et al., 2023).

3.1 Task-Level Contamination

Task-level contamination means that researchers in this field typically select a specific task, such as classification and question answering. By establishing a fixed benchmark, they vary the extent of data contamination to observe changes in performance. For example, Magar and Schwartz (2022) pretrain a BERT-based model (an *encoder-only* architecture) on a combined corpus of Wikipedia and labeled data from downstream tasks. The findings reveal that while models can memorize data during pretraining, they do not consistently utilize this memorized information in an effective manner. Additionally, the extent of exploitation is affected by several factors, including the duplication of contaminated data and the model size. Jiang et al. (2024) explore the contamination effect of the *decoder-only* architecture using GPT-2. Specifically, they pretrained GPT-2 on a selected portion of The Pile (Gao et al., 2020) corpora, intentionally introducing contaminated data during the pretraining phase to assess its impact. Their findings reveal that traditional n-gram-based methods are limited in detecting contamination, and increase the repetition of contaminated data inversely affects model performance, leading to a performance drop. Zhu et al. (2024) also investigate the relation between memorization and generation in the context of critical data size with the configuration of grokking (Power et al., 2022), a phenomenon where a model suddenly achieves near-perfect performance on a task after a period of apparent stagnation during training. The authors introduce the Data Efficiency Hypothesis, which outlines three stages of data interaction during model training: insufficiency, sufficiency, and surplus. The study observes that as models grow, they require larger datasets to reach a smooth phase transition.

3.2 Language-Level Contamination

Most research on task-level contamination is conducted in English. However, in addition to task-level contamination, Blevins and Zettlemoyer (2022) also explore language-level contamination, which refers to the issue in cross-lingual evaluation where the setting is sometimes compromised because the pre-training corpora often contain significant amounts of non-English text, such as Chinese characters. If a model is trained on these corpora and then tested on a Chinese benchmark, the setting is no longer purely cross-lingual, as the model has already been exposed to Chinese characters during training. Their research indicates that the corpora utilized for pretraining these models include a significant amount of non-English text, albeit less than 1% of the total dataset. This seemingly small percentage equates to hundreds of millions of foreign language tokens in large datasets. The study further reveals that these minor proportions of non-English data considerably enhance the models' capability for cross-language knowledge transfer. There is a direct correlation between the models' performance in target languages and the volume of training data available in those languages.

4 Detecting Data Contamination

In this section, we discuss various methods for detecting data contamination. We begin with the traditional retrieval-based method, which primarily employs n-gram tokenization and string-matching for detection. This approach is often documented in technical reports by proprietary companies. Subsequently, we introduce several modern methods predominantly developed by the academic community. These methods typically detect contamination indirectly and implicitly, without requiring full access to the training corpora.

4.1 Retrieval

One straightforward approach to detecting contamination is searching the training data for examples that appear in a benchmark. This line of research can be approached from two perspectives: the perspective of model developers and that of the academic community.

4.1.1 Model Developer-Side

In the era of LLMs, OpenAI set a significant precedent with the release of GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020). GPT-3 pioneered a detailed approach to detecting data contamination in LLMs from an internal perspective. The methodology involved filtering the initial training set to eliminate any text from the benchmarks that appeared in the training data. This was achieved by identifying overlaps through searching for 13-gram matches between the test/development sets and the training data. Overlaps were analyzed using a variable word count, determined by the 5th percentile of example length in words, with a set minimum threshold of 8 words for non-synthetic tasks and a maximum of 13 words for all tasks.

Following this work, Llama-2 (Touvron et al., 2023b) employs a similar technique to detect data contamination, combining retrieval methods with n-gram-based tokenization. Specifically, any token n-gram match exceeding 10 tokens indicates contamination. This method facilitates a nuanced analysis of contamination levels, classifying samples as *clean* (*i.e.*, less than 20% contamination), *not clean* (*i.e.*, 20-80% contamination), and *dirty* (*i.e.*, more than 80% contamination). It uses skip-grams longer than 10 tokens and suffix arrays for efficient identification, employing parallel processing to improve speed and scalability.

4.1.2 Academic Community-Side

Beyond technical reports from model developers, many recent studies by the academic community focus on contamination in open-source pretraining corpora commonly used to develop LLMs. This body of research typically involves constructing effective and convenient tools, developing indexing systems for retrieval, and designing algorithms to determine potential contamination between retrieved passages and benchmark data.

Searching Tools To explore different pretrained corpora, various specialized tools have been de-

Method	Level	Access to Training Corpora Required?	Logits Prob. Required?	Retrieval?	Prompt-based?
Brown et al. (2020)	Instance	✓	✗	✓	✗
Chowdhery et al. (2022)	Instance	✓	✗	✓	✗
Touvron et al. (2023a)	Instance	✓	✗	✓	✗
Yeom et al. (2018)	Instance	✗	✓	✗	✗
Carlini et al. (2021)	Instance	✗	✓	✗	✗
Dodge et al. (2021)	Instance	✓	✗	✓	✗
Carlini et al. (2022)	Instance	✗	✓	✗	✗
Elazar et al. (2023)	Instance	✓	✗	✓	✗
Li (2023)	Dataset	✗	✓	✗	✗
Shi et al. (2023)	Dataset	✗	✓	✗	✗
Aiyappa et al. (2023)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✗
Roberts et al. (2023)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✗
Golchin and Surdeanu (2023a)	Dataset	✗	✗	✗	✓
Golchin and Surdeanu (2023b)	Both	✗	✗	✗	✓
Oren et al. (2023)	Dataset	✗	✓	✗	✗
Deng et al. (2023)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✓
Bordt et al. (2024)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✓
Wei et al. (2023)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✗
Mattern et al. (2023)	Instance	✗	✓	✗	✗
Xu et al. (2024b)	Instance	✗	✗	✗	✓

Table 1: Comparison of current data contamination detection method.

veloped. Piktus et al. (2023a) introduce a search engine that spans the entirety of the ROOTS corpus (Laurençon et al., 2023), featuring both fuzzy and exact search capabilities. Furthermore, Piktus et al. (2023b) present Gaia, a search engine designed based on established principles, providing access to four widely recognized large-scale text collections: C4 (Raffel et al., 2023), The Pile (Gao et al., 2020), LAION (Schuhmann et al., 2022), and ROOTS (Laurençon et al., 2023). Additionally, Elazar et al. (2023) develop WIMBD, a platform offering 16 analytical tools that enable users to uncover and contrast the contents of vast text corpora.

Indexing System The primary limitation of search tools is their dependency on extensive computational resources, combined with the absence of APIs for scalable integration. For individuals endeavoring to develop a custom information retrieval system, Lin et al. (2021) introduce Pyserini, a user-friendly Python-based toolkit designed for replicable information retrieval (IR) research. Pyserini facilitates various retrieval methods, including sparse retrieval using BM25 with bag-of-words representations, dense retrieval via nearest-neighbor search in transformer-encoded spaces, and a hybrid approach that combines both methods. Researchers also have used such indexing tools to investigate data contamination (Deng et al., 2023) for investigating contamination in commonly used pretraining corpora such as The Pile and C4.

Benchmarks Overlap Analysis In their pioneering work, Dodge et al. (2021) conduct the first comprehensive analysis of data contamination between the C4 corpus (Raffel et al., 2023) and downstream tasks. This study uncovers a significant volume of text from unexpected sources, including patents and US military websites. Further scrutiny reveals the presence of machine-generated content, such as text from machine translation systems, and evaluation examples from various NLP datasets. Building on this, Elazar et al. (2023) present an analysis that explores the overlap between pretraining corpora and the SuperGLUE (Sarlin et al., 2020) benchmark.

4.2 Temporal Cutoff

The concept of time-cutoff implies a significant distinction between models developed or the use of training data up to a certain time point. For instance, GPT-3 was trained using data available only up to September 2021 (OpenAI, 2022). This approach assumes that substantial changes in the dataset's distributions or variances, stemming from a specific time cut-off, are critically important.

Roberts et al. (2023) conduct one of the first comprehensive longitudinal analysis of data contamination in LLMs. Specifically, they leverage the natural experiment provided by the training cutoffs in GPT models to examine benchmarks released over time. They analyze two code/mathematical problem-solving datasets. Their findings reveal statistically significant trends between LLM pass rates, GitHub popularity, and release dates, which strongly indicate contamination. Aiyappa et al. (2023) also conduct similar experiments to assess performance difference in models before and after their release. Besides, Shi et al. (2023) create a benchmark termed WIKIMIA utilizing data compiled both before and after model training to facilitate accurate detection. Similarly, Li et al. (2023) employ the most recent data to develop a benchmark that is less prone to contamination, enabling a fair evaluation.

The time-cutoff technique requires verification that data before and after a specific time-cutoff exhibit distinct distributions with minimal overlap. Additionally, new events or messages extracted from the internet may also overlap with previous ones. For employing a time-cutoff strategy, it is essential to account for and evaluate these potential overlaps in experimental setups.

4.3 Masking-based

Another approach to detecting data contamination involves masking-based methods, which masks a word or sentence and provides the LLMs with context from a benchmark to guide them in filling in the missing portions. The advantage of this approach is its simplicity and effectiveness.

Book-Level Chang et al. (2023) propose the *name cloze* task, wherein names within a book are masked, prompting LLMs to predict the omitted names. This task is specifically designed to evaluate the extent to which models like ChatGPT and GPT-4 have internalized copyrighted content, linking memorization levels to the prevalence of book excerpts online. The findings reveal a notable performance disparity between GPT-4 and ChatGPT in executing the name cloze task, suggesting variations in their capacity to recall and utilize memorized information.

Benchmark-level Deng et al. (2023) introduce TS-Guessing, a masking-based method designed for benchmark formats to detect data contamination. This technique involves masking an incorrect answer in a multiple-choice question and prompting the model to complete the missing information. It also entails hiding an unlikely word in an evaluation example and requesting the model to generate it. Their findings reveal that several proprietary LLMs can precisely recall the masked incorrect choice in the benchmarks, highlighting a significant potential for contamination in these benchmarks that warrants attention. However, they note that their method depends on the proficient instruction-following capabilities of LLMs. For less capable LLMs, there is a tendency to replicate other choices or produce the correct answer without adhering to the given instructions.

Part of Xu et al. (2024b) also employs similar methods. Given a sequence, they progressively move forward from the first token and guide LLMs to predict the missing portions of the following part. Their method could be treated as a more quantitative version of Deng et al. (2023), which calculates the results primarily on open-sourced LLMs.

4.4 Perturbation-based

Perturbation-based methods involve using various techniques to artificially modify or alter test set samples. This is done to assess if LLMs are overfitting to particular benchmark formats or examples. The objective of this task is to examine whether there is a significant drop or change in performance after applying specific perturbations.

Rephrasing Test Set Yang et al. (2023) demonstrate that applying minor alterations to test data, such as rephrasing or translating, can bypass previous n-gram-based detection methods (§4.1.1). They reveal that if test data variability isn't eliminated, a 13B model can mimic the performance of state-of-the-art models like GPT-4 by overfitting to benchmarks, as evidenced by their experiments with notable datasets including MMLU (Hendrycks et al., 2021), GSM8K (Cobbe et al., 2021), and HumanEval (Chen et al., 2021). To address this growing issue, they propose a new LLM-based detection approach, which uncovers significant, yet previously unnoticed overlaps in test sets across widely used pretraining and fine-tuning corpora. In a recent paper, Dekoninck et al. (2024b) propose ConStat, a novel method for detecting and quantifying contamination in LLMs. The authors redefine contamination from a performance-based perspective, considering it as artificially inflated benchmark performance that fails to generalize to real-world tasks. ConStat employs a statistical test that compares a model's performance on the original benchmark to its performance on carefully selected reference benchmarks, while accounting for differences in difficulty using a set of uncontaminated reference models.

Creating Reference Set In addition to directly rephrasing test set examples, Wei et al. (2023) use GPT-4 to create a reference set resembling the test set. They then calculate the difference between reference set and test set to assess the contamination issues, potentially caused by intentional data contamination. Higher differences indicate a greater potential for data leakage.

4.5 Canonical order

The canonical assumption posits that if a model has been exposed to data from a dataset, it will exhibit a preference for the canonical order provided by the dataset from public repositories, as opposed to datasets that have been randomly shuffled.

Oren et al. (2023) develop a sensitivity test to detect biases in the canonical order of benchmark datasets used for LLMs. Based on the principle that, in the absence of data contamination, any permutation of an exchangeable benchmark dataset should be equally likely, they create a methodology capable of identifying contamination through the model's preference for specific data orderings. Remarkably, this approach is sophisticated enough to detect contamination in models with as few as 1.4 billion parameters, utilizing test sets of merely 1,000 examples. It proves effective even in datasets with minimal representation in the training corpus.

The limitation of this assumption is that if the model preprocesses the pretraining dataset or intentionally shuffles the benchmark data, it becomes challenging to identify potential contamination from the perspective of canonical order.

4.6 Behavior Manipulation

We term behavior observation as a new perspective that leverages different perspectives of controlling experiment related to the test set. This is done by observing whether the behavior (*i.e.*, output and selection choice) are different.

Golchin and Surdeanu (2023b) propose a dual-layered approach for identifying contamination in LLMs at both the instance and partition levels. The initial phase employs *guided instruction*, a technique that utilizes a specific prompt incorporating the dataset name, partition type, and an initial segment of a reference instance. This prompt encourages the LLM to generate a completion. An instance is considered contaminated if the LLMs' output closely resembles or exactly matches the subsequent segment of the reference. Building on this concept, Golchin and Surdeanu (2023a) introduce a novel methodology by devising a data contamination quiz. This quiz presents a set of choices, including one from the test set and others that are variations of the original instance. The model is then tasked with selecting an option, and its decision is used to assess contamination based on its choice. This approach not only follows the general pattern of contamination detection but also offers a unique perspective by varying the format of the choices provided to the model.

Besides, Dong et al. (2024) propose CDD (Contamination Detection via output Distribution) for detecting data contamination and TED (Trustworthy Evaluation via output Distribution) for mitigating its impact on evaluation. CDD identifies contamination by analyzing the peakedness of the LLM's output distribution using only the sampled texts, while TED corrects the output distribution to ensure trustworthy evaluation.

To employ methods based on this assumption, researchers must verify that behavior differences are solely attributable to data contamination, particularly in contrast to variations arising from random prompt perturbation.

4.7 Membership Inference Attacks

Membership Inference Attacks (MIA) aim to determine whether a specific data point was used in the training data of a target model. While MIA is a well-established concept in traditional machine learning (Shokri et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2022), their application in the context of LLMs has been relatively understudied. This subsection explores the application of MIA to LLMs, demonstrating their utility in detecting contamination.

Background Yeom et al. (2018) measure the perplexity of a sample to measure the memorization of training data. Carlini et al. (2021) build upon this work to further improve precision and reduce the false negative rate by considering the intrinsic complexity of the target point. Furthermore, Carlini et al. (2022) calibrate the sample's loss under the target model using the sample's zlib compression size.

Applying MIA to LLMs Mattern et al. (2023) introduce and assess neighbourhood attacks as a novel method to evaluate model vulnerabilities without requiring access to the training data distribution. They use an estimate of the curvature of the loss function at a given sample, which is computed by perturbing the target sequence to create n neighboring points, and comparing the loss of the target x, with its neighbors. By comparing model scores of a given sample with those of synthetically generated neighbour texts, this approach seeks to understand if model fragility can enhance security.

Recently, Shi et al. (2023) introduce MIN-K%, a method that utilizes the $k\%$ of tokens with the lowest likelihoods to compute a score, rather than averaging over all token probabilities as in traditional loss calculations. This approach is based on the hypothesis that an unseen example is likely to contain a few outlier words with low probabilities under LLMs, whereas a seen example is less likely to feature words with such low probabilities.

Additionally, (Ye et al., 2024) propose Polarized Augment Calibration (PAC), a novel approach for detecting training data contamination in black-box LLMs. PAC extends the MIA framework by leveraging confidence discrepancies across spatial data distributions and considering both distant and proximal probability regions to refine confidence metrics.

MIA in the context of LLMs is typically based on perplexity or variations derived from language model perplexity. This implies reliance on the output logits probability from the language models. However, its statistical simplicity also offers significant advantages compared to other detection methods that require careful validation of assumption.

5 Mitigating Data Contamination

Without specific mitigation strategies, the development of new benchmarks—often released publicly on the internet—does not resolve contamination issues, as newer models can access this data. Consequently, several studies have proposed mitigation approaches to address this problem. In this section, we will introduce these strategies from the perspectives of benchmark construction, updating, encryption, and protection.

Benchmark Construct Selection Li et al. (2023) propose to construct evaluation benchmarks from the most recent texts, thus minimizing the risk of overlap with the pre-training corpora.

Dynamic Benchmark Refreshing Zhu et al. (2023a) introduce a dynamic evaluation protocol that utilizes directed acyclic graphs to generate evaluation samples of varying complexities, aiming to address the static and potentially contaminated nature of existing benchmarks. Besides, Zhu et al. (2023b) provide Clean-Eval, which utilizes LLMs to paraphrase and back-translate contaminated data, creating a set of expressions that convey the same meaning in varied forms. This process generates a candidate set from which low-quality samples are filtered out using a semantic detector. The final selection of the best candidate from this refined set is based on the BLEURT (Sellam et al., 2020) score, ensuring the chosen expression is semantically similar to the original data but articulated differently. Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2023) also suggest providing a diverse set of prompts for testing, which offers a dynamic evaluation to mitigate data contamination.

Benchmark Data Encryption Jacovi et al. (2023) suggests that test data released to the public should be safeguarded through encryption using a public key, and the distribution of derivatives should be strictly prohibited by the licensing agreement. To implement this, the recommended approach is toencrypt the test data before uploading it. This can be efficiently done by compressing the data into a password-secured archive.

Benchmark Label Protection Jacovi et al. (2023) and Zhou et al. (2023) emphasize the critical need to safeguard the ground truth labels of test datasets. These labels can inadvertently be exploited during the training phase, or even intentionally after being rephrased. Providing both the question and its context is an effective strategy to prevent such deliberate contamination.

6 Discussion and Future Directions

Besides addressing the impact, detection, and mitigation of previously introduced data contamination, this section will also explore the topic at a higher level. We aim to offer more insights into the current challenges, the necessity, and the robustness of detecting data contamination methods. We will also discuss how these concepts can be applied in more realistic settings. Additionally, we will consider data contamination as an overarching research direction and explore potential future pathways for this field.

Challenges for Detecting Black-Box Models The primary challenge in evaluating different methods for detecting data contamination in large language models is the absence of a ground truth label, *i.e.*, a benchmark dataset comprising entirely contaminated data. This absence creates difficulties in comparing the effectiveness of various detection techniques designed for black-box models. One alternative approach involves fine-tuning the model using test set labels to create artificially contaminated data. However, the question remains whether the scenarios of contamination during the pretraining phase and the fine-tuning phase are consistent. Additionally, due to limited access to the complete training corpus, we can only generate fully contaminated data, making it challenging to obtain fully uncontaminated data. This situation complicates efforts to accurately assess and compare the efficacy of contamination detection methods.

Dodging Detection of Data Contamination is Easy Dekoninck et al. (2024a) highlights the ease with which MIA detection methods can be evaded. These methods, some of which are also employed for identifying data contamination, have been criticized in prior research. Notably, the efficacy of n-gram based substring detection is questioned due to its numerous vulnerabilities and susceptibility to manipulation (Zhou et al., 2023; Deng et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2024). Beyond the traditional n-gram and MIA approaches, recent studies have demonstrated that several contemporary techniques can be compromised through targeted attacks. For instance, by integrating a dataset with a significantly large pre-trained dataset, one can disrupt the canonical order assumption, thereby undermining its integrity.

From Memorization to Exploitation Drawing a definitive conclusion about the correlation between memorization and exploitation (*i.e.*, performance on downstream tasks) remains challenging. Various factors can impact the outcomes observed in our study, including differences in model architecture, the repetition of contaminated data, the strategies employed during pretraining or finetuning phases, and the training principles used like RLHF+PPO (Zheng et al., 2023) and DPO (Rafailov et al., 2023). These elements can significantly influence the models' downstream task performance.

Detecting or Mitigating? Currently, there is an increasing focus on developing novel methods for detecting data contamination, which is crucial for investigating and understanding data contamination scenarios. Effective detection tools can also help prevent intentional data contamination to a certain extent. However, there remains a significant need for research focused on mitigating data contamination. The research question arises: how can we create a dynamic evaluation method that uses potentially contaminated benchmarks to provide clean evaluations? In recent developments, many have started leveraging language models as agents to perform various tasks. An intriguing future direction could be to utilize LLMs as 'Benchmark Agents' to offer various forms of evaluation that convey the same meaning.

How to Create Benchmarks without Data Contamination To address the challenge of creating a benchmark free from data contamination, it is essential to consider innovative approaches. Firstly, an effective strategy involves constructing a dataset significantly larger than the target size. This excess allows for the application of rigorous data contamination checks to refine the dataset down to its actual size. Additionally, the implementation of a unified, reliable, and dynamic evaluation framework is crucial. Such a framework offers the flexibility to adaptively assess benchmarks across various formats, enhancing the robustness of the evaluation process. Beyond these broader strategies, a practical yet profound method involves generating content that is rare or virtually nonexistent on the Internet or other public domains.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we present an extensive and meticulously organized survey on the topic of data contamination in large language models. We start by laying the groundwork with a discussion on the effect of contamination, setting the stage for a deeper examination of various data contamination detection methods. We critically analyze the assumptions underlying these methods, highlighting their limitations and the prerequisites for their application. Subsequently, we explore strategies for mitigating data contamination, addressing potential challenges and suggesting directions for future research in this area. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive guide for NLP researchers seeking a systematic understanding of data contamination. We also aim to underscore the critical importance of this field, advocating for increased attention due to its pressing relevance.

8 Limitations

It is challenging to provide a quantitative comparison between different data contamination detection methods due to their varying assumptions and requirements. Ideally, we would conduct a quantitative analysis to assess the effectiveness of these methods, assigning rankings or benchmarks to discuss their advantages and disadvantages. Another limitation of the survey paper is the difficulty in categorizing each method into a single, definitive class. For instance, Shi et al. (2023) not only offers benchmarks and analyses but also proposes a detection method. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2023) discusses both the detection of contamination and strategies for its mitigation. Our approach primarily classifies each work into its most evident category, aiming for clarity and precision, though this may sometimes compromise rigor.

9 Ethics Statement

In our survey paper, which examines the impact of data contamination, alongside methods for its detection and mitigation, we assert that our work not only adheres to ethical standards and avoids potential misuse issues, but also offers a comprehensive summary that contributes to the fair and transparent evaluation of large language models. This positions it as a valuable resource for promoting fairness and transparency within the community.

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