

17-803 Empirical Methods

Bogdan Vasilescu, S3D

The Role of Theory

Thursday, January 29, 2026

Outline for Today

- ▶ Discuss the two readings
- ▶ Reflect on the role of theory

[\[HTML\] A multi-method investigation of consumer motivations in impulse buying behavior](#)

[A Hausman](#) - [Journal of consumer marketing](#), 2000 - [emerald.com](#)

This study used both qualitative and quantitative data to test hypotheses related to consumers' motivations to engage in impulse buying. A grounded theory approach was used to develop hypotheses from in-depth interviews. These hypotheses were tested by the collection and analysis of survey data. Data support the theory that impulse buying is a common method of product selection, in part, because the shopping act and impulsive product selection provide hedonic rewards. Further information-processing overload ...

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[A familiar face \(book\) profile elements as signals in an online social network](#)

[CAC Lampe](#), [N Ellison](#), [C Steinfield](#) - [Proceedings of the SIGCHI ...](#), 2007 - [dl.acm.org](#)

Using data from a popular online social network site, this paper explores the relationship between profile structure (namely, which fields are completed) and number of friends, giving designers insight into the importance of the profile and how it works to encourage connections and articulated relationships between users. We describe a theoretical framework that draws on aspects of signaling theory, common ground theory, and transaction costs theory to generate an understanding of why certain profile fields may be ...

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What Is a Theory?

- ▶ A theory is a set of **propositions** that are logically related, expressing the **relation(s) among several different constructs and propositions**.
- ▶ Characteristics:
 - ▶ Identifies and defines constructs / phenomena;
 - ▶ Makes assertions about their nature;
 - ▶ Makes assertions about the causal relationships between them;
 - ▶ Explains *why* certain relationships occur (good theories).
- ▶ Theories are the building blocks of scientific knowledge.
 - ▶ They explain how and why certain phenomena occur, and allow predictions to be made.
 - ▶ The more data supporting the theory, the stronger it becomes.

What Is a Theory?

- ▶ Theories can be:
 - ▶ descriptive (i.e., naming and characterizing a phenomenon),
 - ▶ explanatory (i.e., clarifying the relationships between phenomena),
 - ▶ emancipatory (i.e., articulating the oppression of a people),
 - ▶ disruptive (i.e., extending existing knowledge or refuting it), or
 - ▶ predictive (i.e., predicting an outcome based on specific inputs).
- ▶ Theories can also have different levels of explanatory power:
 - ▶ Grand theories: highly abstract; broad natural or social patterns (e.g., Marxist theories of society)
 - ▶ Mid-range theories: address more specific aspects of human interactions (e.g., signaling theory)
 - ▶ Microtheories: focus on individual-level phenomena (see microsociology)

Theories Explaining Phenomena Can Compete

- ▶ Different theories **can address different aspects** of a phenomenon, each offering different insights into the phenomenon.
- ▶ Different theories **can even address the same aspect** of a phenomenon.
 - ▶ Theories that are simpler, or more elegant are preferred.
- ▶ Read broadly!

Theory for Positivists vs Constructivists

- ▶ **Positivists** expect their theories to have strong **predictive power**.
 - ▶ e.g., generalized models of cause-and-effect as the basis for theories.
- ▶ **Constructivists** expect theories to strengthen their **understanding** of complex situations.
 - ▶ e.g., frequent use of categorizations and analogies.

How Objectivist Deductive Researchers Use Theory

- ▶ A theory as the **starting point** for the research project.
- ▶ The theory offers **testable components**:
 - ▶ the cause-and-effect relationships that can be examined,
 - ▶ the concepts that should be operationalized,
 - ▶ the variables that are relevant to control.
- ▶ These testable components are used to generate **specific hypotheses** which are the foundation for a study.

How Objectivist Deductive Researchers Use Theory

- ▶ The theory is part of the **object of research**.
 - ▶ simultaneously test a hypothesis derived from theory and the accompanying theory underlying that hypothesis.
- ▶ The theory must:
 - ▶ (1) be **testable**;
 - ▶ (2) be **open to being falsified**.
- ▶ New knowledge: evidence to **support, refine, or challenge** a theory.
- ▶ **Linear progression**: theory → hypothesis development → data collection → interpretation of findings → refinement of theory / generation of new causal explanations.

How Subjectivist Inductive Researchers Use Theory

- ▶ (1) Theory as the **product of research**.
 - ▶ Grounded Theory: generating theory from the data; most fully inductive.
- ▶ (2) One or more theories **informing the research process**.
 - ▶ theory shapes every stage of the research process, including research questions, data collection, etc.
 - ▶ theory refinement / development may be a major research output.
- ▶ (3) Theory as an **interpretive tool**.
 - ▶ chosen during data analysis processes to shape the final study interpretations and conclusions.
 - ▶ may have to modify the data collection and analysis partway as new theory becomes relevant.
- ▶ All three are valid.
 - ▶ But make early, explicit decision as to when and how to use theory (impacts development of the theoretical framework).

Theory Case Study:

- ▶ Easterbrook, S., Singer, J., Storey, M. A., & Damian, D. (2008). Selecting empirical methods for software engineering research. In *Guide to advanced empirical software engineering* (pp. 285-311). Springer, London.
- ▶ Varpio, L., Paradis, E., Uijtdehaage, S., & Young, M. (2020). The distinctions between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework. *Academic Medicine*, 95(7), 989-994.



- ▶ Topic: using AI to generate programming source code from natural language
 - ▶ 9 months into his PhD
 - ▶ Has built a tool
 - ▶ Needs an evaluation plan
-

Meet Stu Dent

Stu's Evaluation Plan

- ▶ Controlled experiment using an IDE plugin
 - ▶ Independent variable: Stu's "NL2Code" vs. writing code "from scratch"
 - ▶ Dependent variables: correctness, speed, subjective assessment
 - ▶ Tasks: various Python
 - ▶ Subjects: CS grad students
 - ▶ Hypotheses:
 - ▶ H1: "Code written using NL2Code is more often correct than code written from scratch."
 - ▶ H2: "Subjects complete tasks faster when using NL2Code than when writing code from scratch."
 - ▶ H3: "Subjects prefer using the snippets from NL2Code over writing code from scratch."
- ▶ Results:
 - ▶ H1 & H2 & H3 rejected*
 - ▶ Subjects found NL2Code unintuitive

* True story: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2101.11149>

Slide idea by Steve Easterbrook

Threats to Validity

- ▶ What is correctness? How is it measured (subjective?)? How is speed measured?
 - ▶ “Construct validity”
- ▶ How familiar were the subjects with the NL2Code plugin?
 - ▶ “Internal validity”
- ▶ Were the tasks representative? Grad student subjects as sample of what population? Are they representative?
 - ▶ “External validity”
- ▶ Subjects knew NL2Code was Stu’s own tool
 - ▶ “Theoretical reliability”
- ▶ ... much more on threats to validity throughout the semester

What Went Wrong?

- ▶ What was the research question?
 - ▶ Is tool A (NL2Code) better than tool B (from scratch)?
- ▶ What would count as an answer?
- ▶ What use would the answer be?
 - ▶ How is it a “contribution to knowledge”?
- ▶ How does this evaluation relate to the existing literature?

Compare to Medical Trials

Why would we expect
it to be better?

Why do we need to
know?

What will we do
with the answer?

Is drug A better than drug B?

Better at doing
what?

Better in what way?

Better in what
situations?

“Meh, doesn’t apply to me, I’m primarily building tools in my research”

Why Build a Tool?

- ▶ **Build a Tool to Test a Theory**

- ▶ Tool is part of the experimental materials needed to conduct your study

- ▶ **Build a Tool to Develop a Theory**

- ▶ Theory emerges as you explore the tool

- ▶ **Build a Tool to Explain your Theory**

- ▶ Theory as a concrete instantiation of (some aspect of) the theory

Why would we expect
it to be better?

You gotta have a theory!

Stu's Theory

- ▶ Background assumptions

- ▶ Tasks can be completed by piecing together code snippets involving popular libraries / APIs
- ▶ Many such example code snippets are available in NL2Code's trained data
- ▶ ...

- ▶ Basic theory (brief summary)

- ▶ Programmers decompose tasks into a **sequence of (small) steps**. At every step, they **know conceptually what must be done next**, but (a) do not know how to **create a concrete implementation** of their idea, or (b) would rather not have to **type it in**. The NL2Code AI could **help speed up task completion especially in the (b) scenario**; otherwise, with (a) users might not recognize which NL2Code search result to use, if multiple, or know how to integrate that snippet into their program. Possible speedups would occur primarily because **users risk getting distracted when they switch context** going outside of their IDEs, and not because of the time it would take to write down source code (because programmers mostly **copy paste code from Stack Overflow** anyway; they rarely write code from scratch). ...

Stu's Theory

- ▶ Some possible derived hypotheses:
 - ▶ For tasks where programmers have extensive prior experience (i.e., they could have written solutions from scratch), using NL2Code should reduce task completion times.
 - ▶ The more steps (e.g., API calls) are involved in implementing a solution to a task, the more NL2Code should speed up task completion times.
 - ▶ ...

Summary

- ▶ In any empirical study, theories become a “**lens**” through which the world is observed and interpreted, whether or not they are explicitly acknowledged.
 - ▶ Real-world phenomena too rich / complex to study without that much filtering.
- ▶ Quantitative methods:
 - ▶ Theory to decide which variables to isolate and measure, and which to ignore or exclude.
- ▶ Qualitative methods:
 - ▶ Theory to focus data analysis / interpretation.

Summary

- ▶ Without the theory, we have no way of **making sense of the accumulation of empirical results**.
 - ▶ An individual study can never offer conclusive results.
- ▶ Theories support **analytical generalization**
 - ▶ Provide a deeper understanding of our empirical results
 - ▶ ...and hence how they apply more generally
 - ▶ Much more powerful than statistical generalization

All Methods Are Flawed

- ▶ E.g. Laboratory Experiments
 - ▶ Cannot study large scale software development in the lab!
 - ▶ Too many variables to control them all!
- ▶ E.g. Case Studies
 - ▶ How do we know what's true in one project generalizes to others?
 - ▶ Researcher chose what questions to ask, hence biased the study
- ▶ E.g. Surveys
 - ▶ Self-selection of respondents biases the study
 - ▶ Respondents tell you what they think they ought to do, not what they actually do
- ▶ etc.

Strategies To Overcome Weaknesses

- ▶ Theory-building
 - ▶ Testing a hypothesis is pointless (single flawed study!)...
 - ▶ ...unless it **builds evidence for a clearly stated theory**
- ▶ Empirical induction
 - ▶ Series of studies over time...
 - ▶ Each designed to probe more aspects of the theory
 - ▶ ...together **build evidence for a clearly stated theory**
- ▶ Mixed-methods research
 - ▶ Use multiple methods to investigate the same research question
 - ▶ Each method compensates for the flaws of the others
 - ▶ ...together **build evidence for a clearly stated theory**

Credits

- ▶ Graphics:

- ▶ Dave DiCello photography (cover)

- ▶ Content:

- ▶ Easterbrook, S., Singer, J., Storey, M. A., & Damian, D. (2008). Selecting empirical methods for software engineering research. In *Guide to advanced empirical software engineering* (pp. 285-311). Springer, London.
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 - ▶ Trockman, A., Zhou, S., Kästner, C., & Vasilescu, B. (2018). Adding sparkle to social coding: an empirical study of repository badges in the npm ecosystem. In *Proceedings of the 40th International Conference on Software Engineering* (pp. 511-522).

Extra:

“Theory” vs “Theoretical Framework” vs “Conceptual Framework”

What Is a Theoretical Framework?

- ▶ A theoretical framework is a **logically developed and connected set of concepts and premises**—developed from one or more theories—that a researcher creates to scaffold a study.
- ▶ To create a theoretical framework, the researcher must **define** any concepts and theories that will provide the grounding of the research, **unite** them through logical connections, and **relate** these concepts to the study that is being carried out.
 - ▶ In short, a theoretical framework is a reflection of the work the researcher engages in to use a theory in a given study.

What Is a Conceptual Framework?

- ▶ A conceptual framework is the **justification for why a given study should be conducted.**
- ▶ The conceptual framework
 - ▶ (1) describes the state of known knowledge, usually through a literature review;
 - ▶ (2) identifies gaps in our understanding of a phenomenon or problem; and
 - ▶ (3) outlines the methodological underpinnings of the research project.
- ▶ It is constructed to answer two questions:
 - ▶ “Why is this research important?” and
 - ▶ “What contributions might these findings make to what is already known?”

How do these concepts relate to the qualitative/quantitative divide?

When and how to use a theory, a theoretical framework, or a conceptual framework?

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How Objectivist Deductive Researchers Use a Theoretical Framework

- ▶ This is the work to render a theory operational, testable, and able to be used to predict, test a hypothesis, or explain a phenomenon.
- ▶ Steps:
 - ▶ identify the theory
 - ▶ articulate why the current context is a legitimate area of study for that theory
 - ▶ shape the constructs of interest
 - ▶ articulate the specific language and assumptions of the research question
 - ▶ identify the variables and conditions of interest
 - ▶ orient the approach to analysis.
- ▶ You need one to:
 - ▶ Be able to **put the theory to the test.**
 - ▶ Be able to **unite findings across research contexts.**

How Objectivist Deductive Researchers Use a Conceptual Framework

- ▶ Typical structure:
 - ▶ a description of relevant literature,
 - ▶ a summary of the relevant theory,
 - ▶ an explanation of why this theory could be informative to this context,
 - ▶ a specific research question that likely contains a hypothesis,
 - ▶ a rationale for the research methodology adopted, and
 - ▶ a series of outcomes or variables of interest.
- ▶ A conceptual framework is finalized before the study and is rarely modified once data collection has started.

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How Subjectivist Inductive Researchers Use a Conceptual Framework

- ▶ Typical structure:
 - ▶ a description of relevant literature,
 - ▶ a summary of relevant theory (first two study designs),
 - ▶ an explanation of why the research should be carried out in the selected context,
 - ▶ research question(s), and
 - ▶ justification for the research methodology selected.
- ▶ The conceptual framework may evolve during a study as new ideas, insights, and knowledge are developed.

Extra:

**Example Borrowed Theory on Signaling
(Positivist Stance / Deductive Strategy)**

Signals

- ▶ Original idea from evolutionary biology
- ▶ Visible clues that imply hidden quality
- ▶ Types of signals
 - ▶ Assessment: visible clue cannot be produced without hidden quality
 - ▶ Conventional: meaning is agreed upon, will continue to exist only if enforced by norms

Stotting as Honest Signal



Peacock Tail Feathers as Handicap Signal



Avoid Colorful Snakes



a) Eastern coral snake (poisonous)

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Avoid Colorful Snakes

Cheater!



a) Eastern coral snake (poisonous)

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(b) Scarlet king snake (nonpoisonous)

Conventional Signals

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Hi there! I’m an Assistant Professor in [CMU’s School of Computer Science](#) and a member of the [Institute for Software Research](#). My students and I form the [Socio-Technical Research Using Data Excavation Lab \(STRUDEL\)](#).

I’m most active in the [software engineering research community](#), where I have co-chaired the [MSR 2020 Data Showcase](#), have been serving on program committees for the major software engineering venues (including [ICSE](#), [FSE](#), and [ASE](#); thanks for the [Distinguished Reviewer Award](#) at ASE 2018!), am an Associate Editor for the [ACM Transactions on Software Engineering and Methodology](#), and am co-chairing the [SIGSOFT Initiative on Data-driven Introspection](#), among [others](#).

On the internets I’m sometimes referred to as a *[“prominent female professor from a gender studies department, that no one ever audits and that gets to peer review herself”](#)*. I also suffer from [cognitive dissonance](#) as a scientist who uses LaTeX.

Prospective Students

If you’re a motivated student looking for a PhD position, check out the [Software Engineering](#) and [Societal Computing](#) programs at CMU, which most of my [current students](#) are part of. Applications are due early/mid December. Please feel free to reach out to me before applying, to introduce yourself and describe your research interests.

Carnegie Mellon University

[17-803] Empirical Methods, Spring 2026

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Conventional Signals – Trustworthy?



I bought fake job references on the Internet—and it worked

By [Aaron Sankin](#)  [Twitter](#) on December 16, 2013

By almost any measure, I have an impeccable résumé.

I spent three years as a staff accountant at [Thomas, Pickford & Thomas](#), an equity research firm with a specialty in oil and gas. It's a small team of investment analysts, accountants, and attorneys with an office in Austin's trendy South Congress

1.4k
Shares 

Professional Fake Job References in 3 Days or Less!

- We Answer Calls Per Your Resume
- Eliminate Gaps in Resume
- Helps you get more interviews faster
- Providing Fake Job References Since July, 2009

Looking for References?

Check Out Real Demo!

Norms, Enforcement

Indiatimes

The Times of India

The Economic Times

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ET NOW

ET Speed

ET Portfolio

04:04 PM | 14 Nov

MARKET STATS

SENSEX

28.046.66

▲ 106.02

NIFTY

8.389.90

▲ 32.05

GOLD (MCX) (Rs/10g.)

26.443.00

▲ 621.00

USD/INR

61.72

▼ 0.15

Login to Track your investment

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Fake CV? Chances are your company will catch you out

Mishila Mehra, ET Bureau Jan 8, 2012, 02:27AM IST

Tags: Sunday ET | Steve Jobs | resume | Fake CV | CV | company

Did you say deception? It is not even a lie, not in the lowly, how-can-you-do-this sort of way. Call it an exaggeration, if you must - the stretched truth that boosts your resume. So what if you forget the 'assistant' in your designation and just write manager or add a few thousands to your current pay. Or extend a job tenure to cover three months of vegetating before the TV - even Steve Jobs needed his psychedelic breaks, didn't he?

Submit



RELATED ARTICLES

Check on job applicants gets deeper as hiring activity goes...

November 28, 2009

There Are Many Signals on a Platform Like GitHub

Built-in (GitHub)

Custom

The screenshot shows the GitHub repository page for 'request/request'. The repository is a 'Simplified HTTP request client'. It has 2,190 commits, 17 branches, 130 releases, 273 contributors, and is licensed under Apache-2.0. The repository has 395 watchers, 16,836 stars, and 2,023 forks. The repository is categorized under 'Code', 'Issues' (523), 'Pull requests' (40), 'Projects' (0), 'Wiki', and 'Insights'. The README.md file is displayed, showing the title 'Request - Simplified HTTP client' and a code block for installing the package via npm. The code block is highlighted with a red border. At the bottom of the README, there are several status indicators: 'build passing', 'coverage 92%', 'coverage 93%', 'dependencies up to date', 'vulnerabilities 0', 'gitter', and 'join chat'.

request / request

Watch 395 Star 16,836 Fork 2,023

Code Issues 523 Pull requests 40 Projects 0 Wiki Insights

Simplified HTTP request client.

2,190 commits 17 branches 130 releases 273 contributors Apache-2.0

README.md

Request - Simplified HTTP client

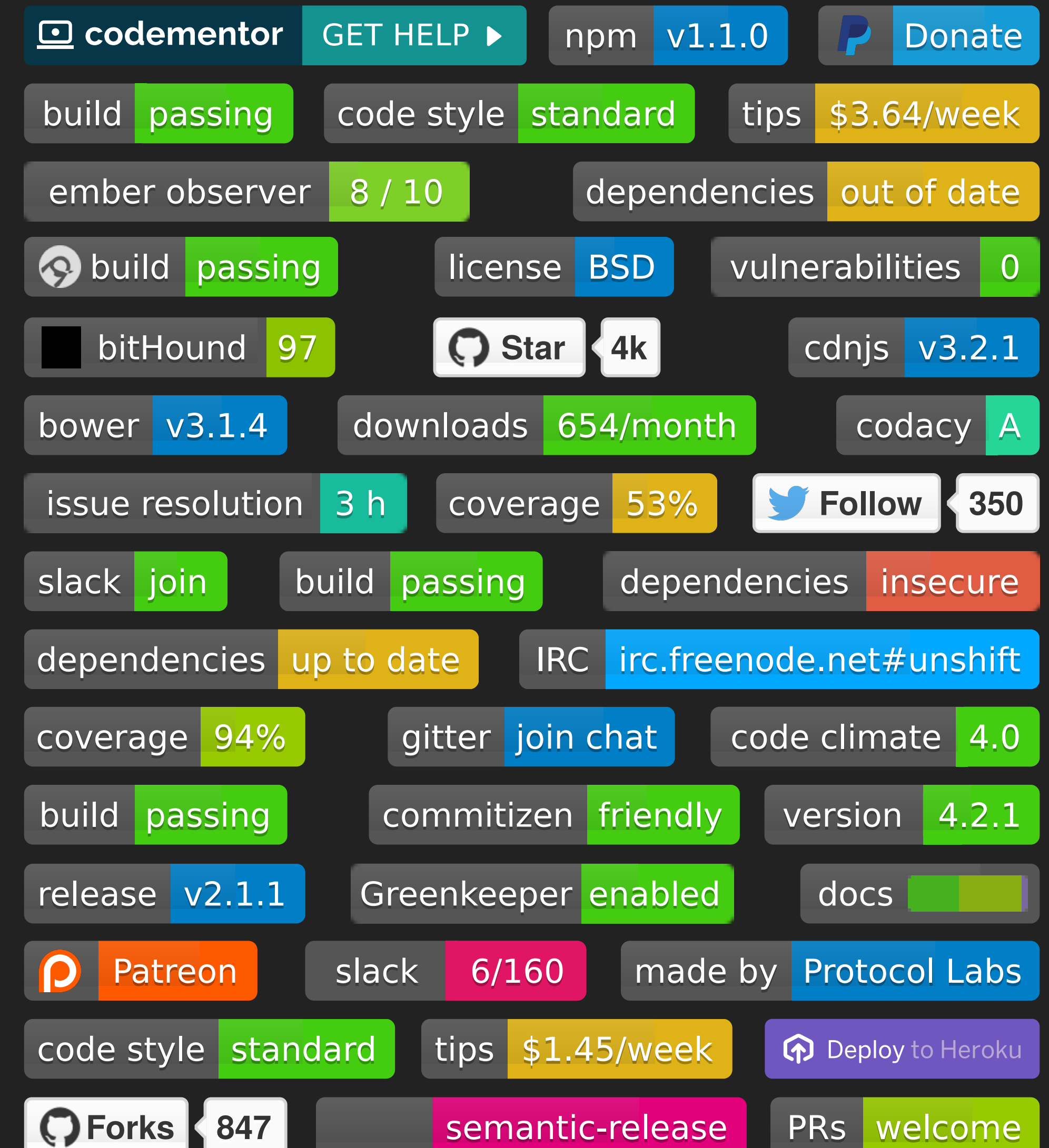


npm install request
22 dependencies version 2.81.0
22,431 dependents updated 6 months ago
1,275 ★

build passing coverage 92% coverage 93% dependencies up to date vulnerabilities 0 gitter join chat

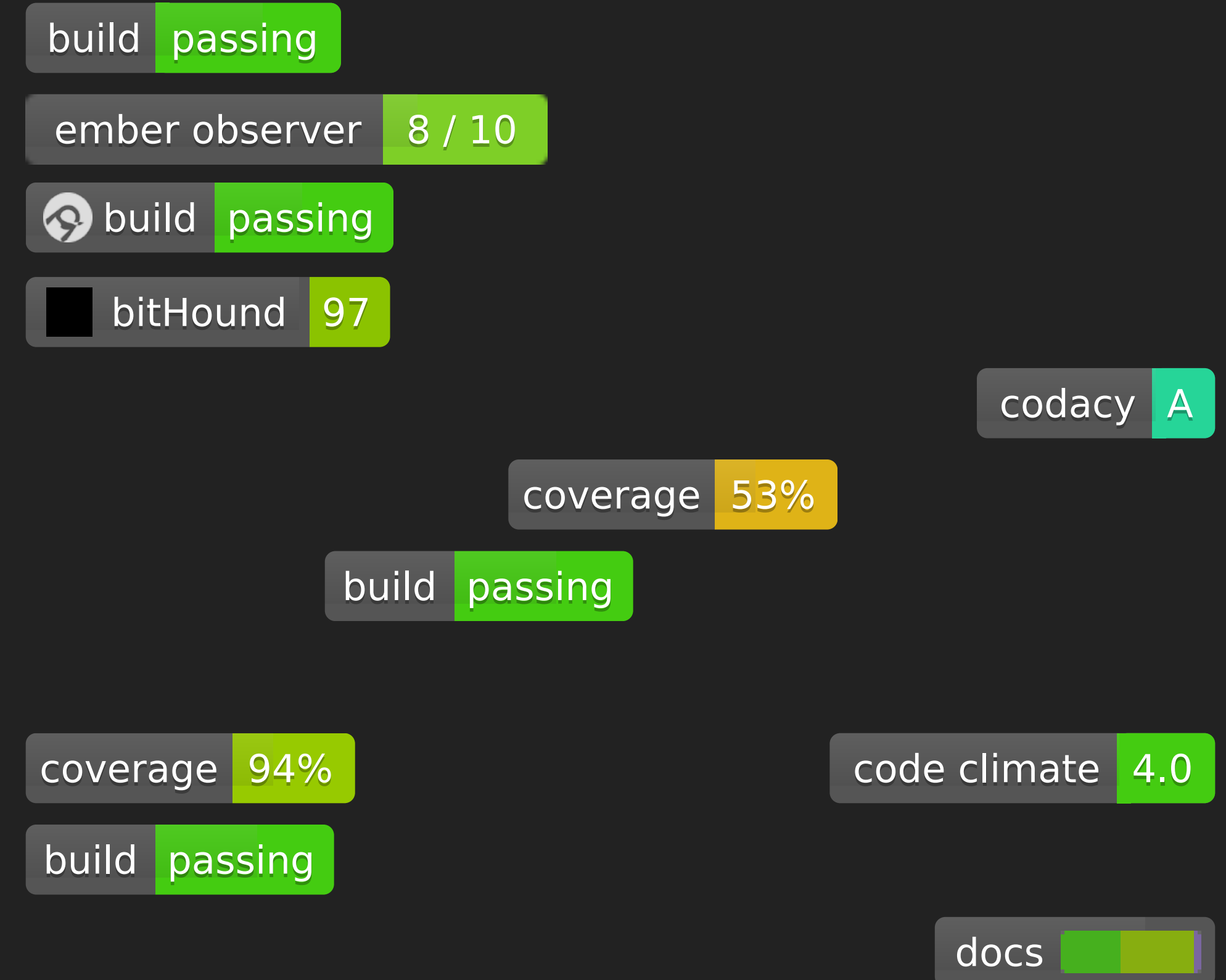
Types of Badges

- ▶ Quality assurance
 - ▶ Build status, test coverage, static analysis, ...
- ▶ Dependency management
 - ▶ Version tracking, vulnerability tracking, ...
- ▶ Information
 - ▶ *npm* version, license, coding style, release strategy, commit message conventions, ...
- ▶ Popularity
 - ▶ *npm* downloads, GitHub stats, Twitter, ...
- ▶ Support
 - ▶ chat & collaboration, issue stats, ...
- ▶ Misc:
 - ▶ Paypal, donations, Gittip, ...



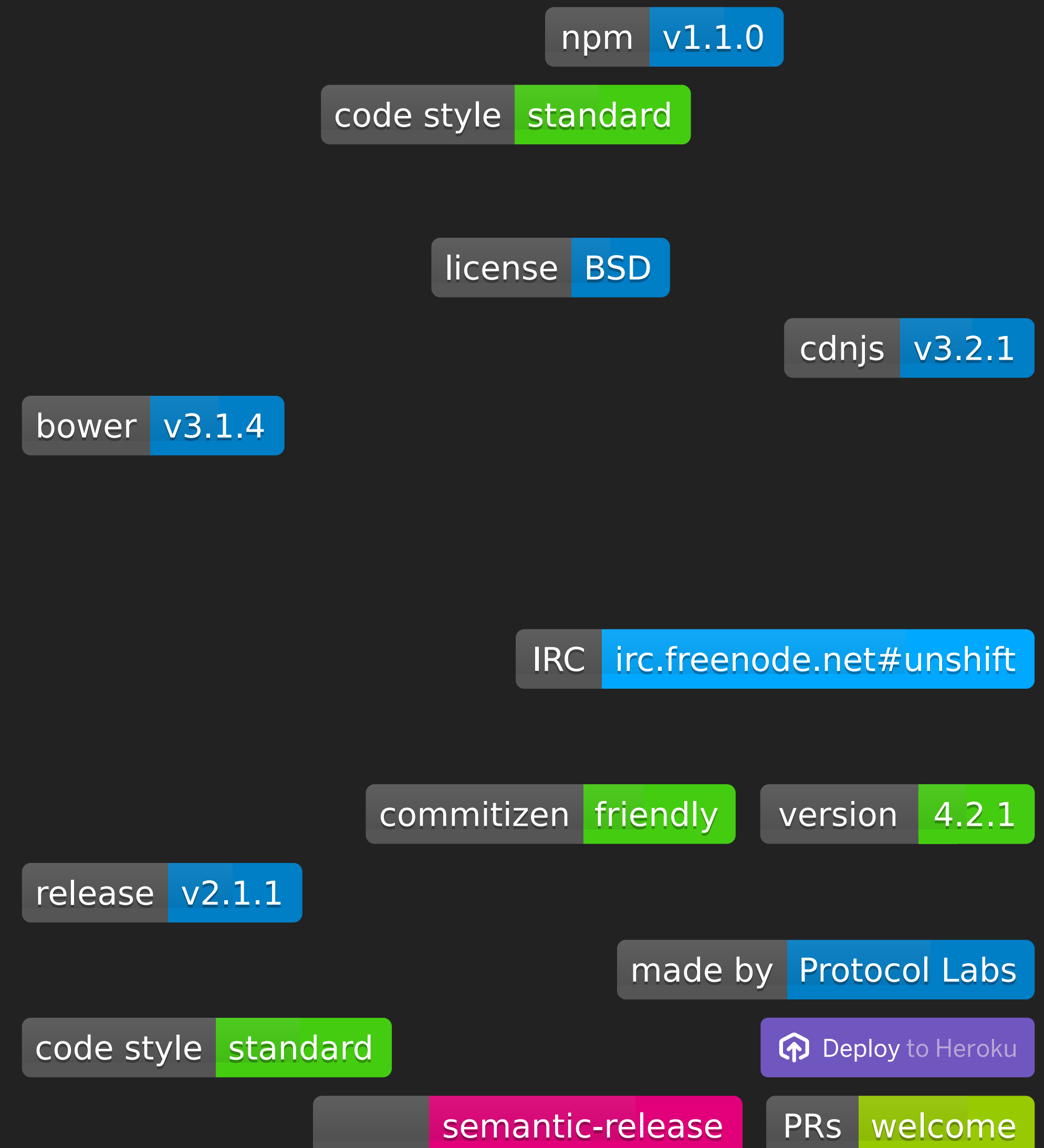
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- ▶ Quality assurance
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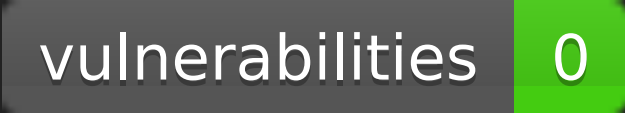
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- ▶ Quality assurance
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 - ▶ Version tracking, vulnerability tracking, ...
- ▶ Information
 - ▶ *npm* version, license, coding style, release strategy, commit message conventions, ...



Conventional Signal Vs Assessment Signal Badges

Badges vary widely in production cost

- Expensive:  
 
- Cheap:   
 
- No cost:  


Can You Trust Them?

seanmonstar / intel

Watch

10

Star

191

Fork

29

<> Code

Issues 11

Pull requests 0

Projects 0

Wiki

Insights

I need more intel!

<http://seanmonstar.github.io/intel/>

224 commits

3 branches

Branch: master

New pull request

README.md

intel

build passing

coverage 100%

npm package 1.2.0

COVERALLS

Repo on GitHub

SEANMONSTAR / INTEL

85%

REPO ADDED

25 SEP 2013

04:18AM UTC

TOTAL FILES

18

BUILDS

110

BADGE

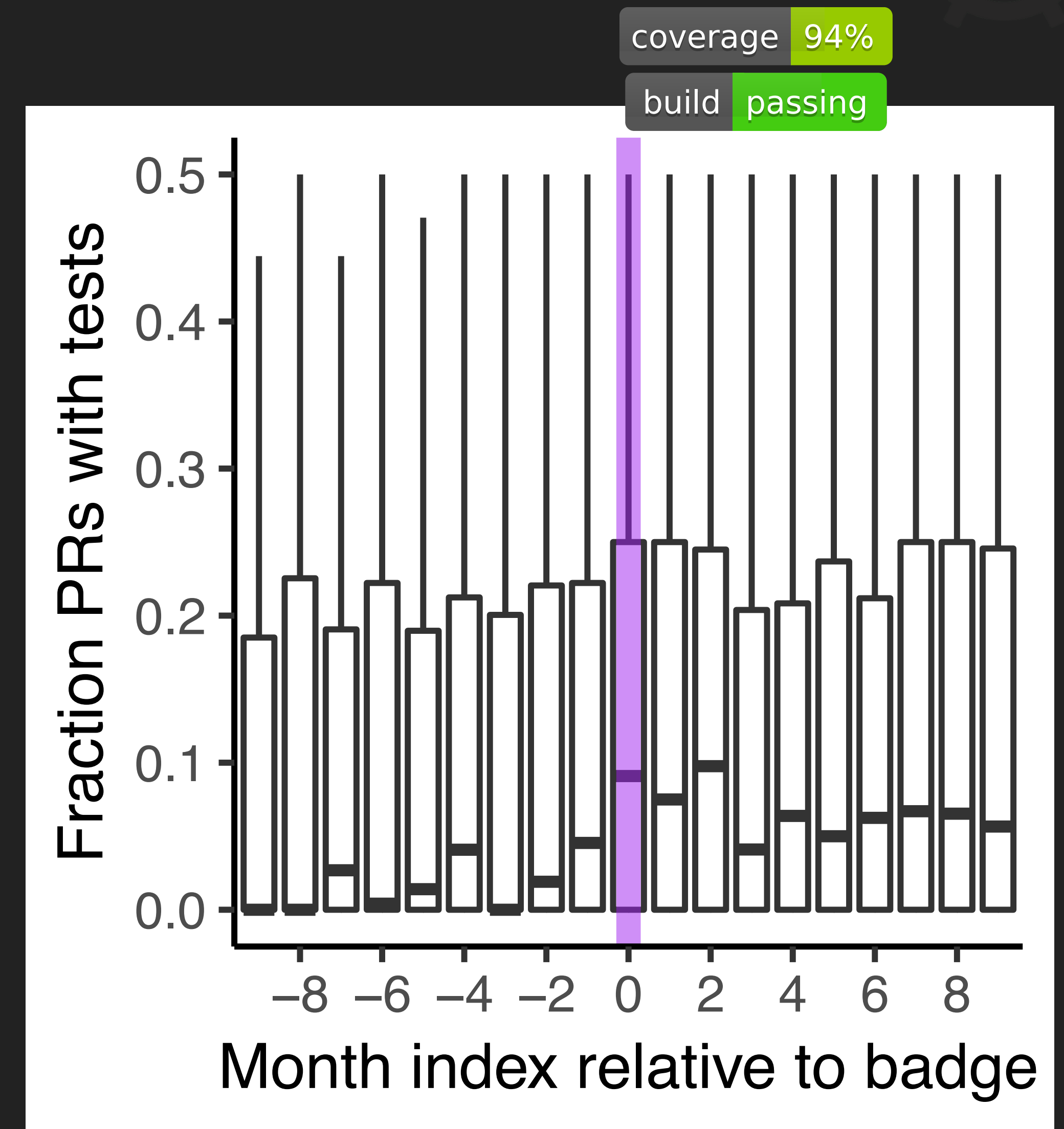
coverage 72%

An abbreviation of intelligence. In this case, the acquirement of information.

Signals of PR Quality

- Hyp: The adoption of a quality-assurance badge, and even more so of a coverage badge, encourages more external contributors to include tests.

Increase in the monthly fraction of PRs containing tests after adopting QA badge

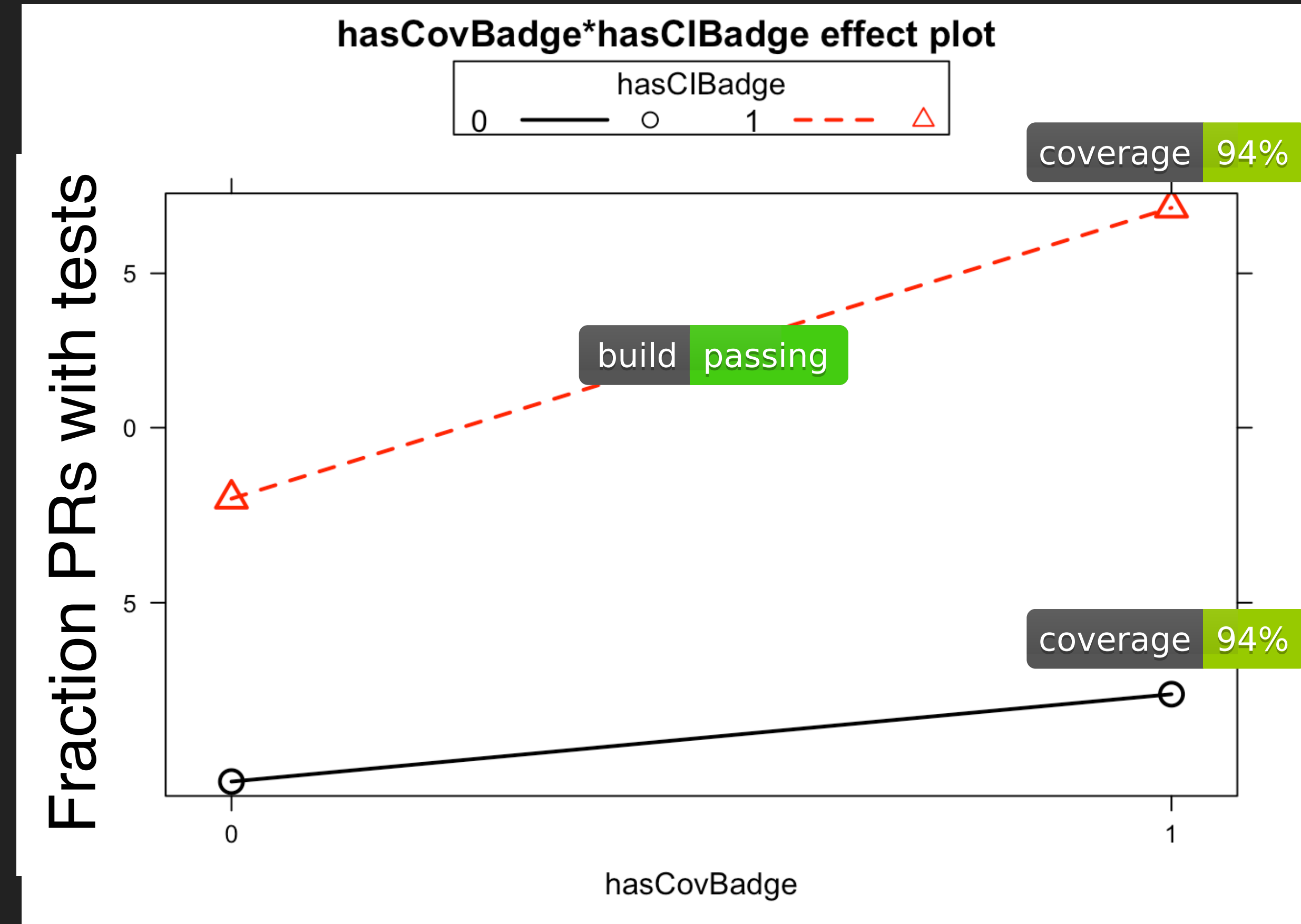


Signals of PR Quality



- Hyp: The adoption of a quality-assurance badge, and even more so of a coverage badge, encourages more external contributors to include tests.

Coverage and CI badges interact, amplifying each other's effects.



Take-Aways (1)

- ▶ Open source developers rely on, and respond to, signals
 - ▶ We add both qualitative and quantitative evidence for badges



Take-Aways (2)

- ▶ Harder to fake badges provide more reliable signals
 - ▶ As signaling theory predicts

build passing

downloads 654/month

dependencies up to date

VS

npm v1.1.0

slack join

Take-Aways (2)

- ▶ Harder to fake badges provide more reliable signals
 - ▶ As signaling theory predicts
- ▶ Redesign badges as assessment signals

code style standard

gitter join chat

slack join



slack 6/160