



DISTRIBUTED NERVOUS SYSTEMS : A MACRO-LEVEL UNDERSTANDING OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE NEUROSCIENCE

Neuroscience

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the concept of the Distributed Nervous Systems (DNS), a revolutionary framework for understanding the interplay between individual and collective cognition. Building upon established theories of neuroscience, the author proposes that the brain functions as a representational simulation system, constantly generating and refining internal models of reality. The DNS extends this concept to a societal level, viewing social groups as interconnected networks of individual brains that synchronize information and create shared realities. We explore how this distributed framework shapes our perception of objective reality, influences decision-making processes, and governs social dynamics. The paper examines real-world applications of the DNS concept, including the role of social media as digital extensions of collective cognition and the potential for redesigning educational systems to harness collaborative learning. Furthermore, we discuss the ethical implications of the DNS model, addressing questions of inclusivity, equity, and the evolution of collective realities. By offering a macro-level understanding of cognition that bridges individual and societal perspectives, this theory opens new avenues for research in neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and artificial intelligence, with far-reaching implications for how we approach complex social challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.

KEYWORDS

The individual brain can be understood as a representational simulation system that constructs internal models of reality through complex neurological processes. This representational simulation system is grounded in the brain's neuroplastic capabilities. Neuroplasticity can be defined as the continuous reconfiguration of neural networks in response to experiences, learning, and environmental changes. The brain does not passively receive external stimuli, but actively generates predictive representations of reality. A representational system is to be understood as where external stimuli are translated into neural patterns that the brain can interpret and interact, which enables the capability of simulation or of past and future. The brain continuously generates top-down predictions and compares them with bottom-up sensory inputs, along with constant reconfiguration of neural connections. From an evolutionary standpoint, the brain's simulation system emerges as a sophisticated survival mechanism, which enables rapid environmental adaptation, facilitates predictive decision-making, and allows complex problem-solving through mental modelling. This quality or capability of simulation of the self and the world is what is referred to as "consciousness" or the "self" (Atman or Ruh) in religions and systems of spirituality.

The brain's ability to simulate reality is not an arbitrary feature but a product of millions of years of evolution by natural selection. Early organisms that could better predict their environment and anticipate threats or opportunities had a survival advantage, which led to the gradual development of more sophisticated neural architectures.

The brain constantly generates hypotheses about what it expects to perceive and then tests these hypotheses against incoming data from the senses. When there is a mismatch between prediction and sensory input (known as prediction error), the brain updates its model to reduce future errors. This is well known as the "Predictive Coding Framework". This process allows for efficient information processing, as the brain does not need to analyze every piece of sensory data from scratch but can rely on its internal simulations to make sense of the world. From this perspective, consciousness can be understood as an emergent property of the brain's representational simulation system. The continuous interaction between top-down predictions and bottom-up sensory inputs creates a coherent experience of reality that we recognize as consciousness. In other words, what we perceive as our conscious experience is not a direct reflection of external reality but rather an interpretation constructed by our brain's simulation processes. The Vedic concept of Maya or the Islamic concept of Duniya, the illusion or veil that obscures true reality can be likened to the brain's representational models or simulations, which are inherently limited and shaped by sensory inputs and prior experiences. Just as Maya creates an illusion of separateness and multiplicity, the brain's simulations create a subjective experience that may not fully capture the objective nature of reality.

Beliefs can be understood as those internal models or simulations that guide behavior and decision-making. According to the credition model, beliefs are formed through neural processes that evaluate external information in terms of personal meaning, thus shaping future behavior. These processes are not purely cognitive but also involve emotional and imaginative content, linking past experiences with future predictions. The brain uses these belief-based simulations to anticipate outcomes, similar to and correlating with how it predicts sensory inputs in the predictive coding framework. The nature of the brain as a representational simulation system can be understood better by analyzing how belief systems affect us, individually as well as collectively. Trust, which can be understood as a deeply ingrained belief or assumption about the reliability of others or the environment, is a key component of human social interaction. But looking deeper, trust is merely a belief system, and "beliefs" can be defined for all purposes as "assumptions". The brain's predictive coding framework also applies to how we form and maintain beliefs, including trust. When we trust someone, our brain generates predictions about their behavior based on past experiences and social cues. If these predictions are confirmed (i.e., the person behaves as expected), the brain reinforces the belief in their trustworthiness by reducing prediction errors. However, if there is a mismatch between expectations and actual behavior (a prediction error), this can lead to a re-evaluation of the belief system. This dynamic process of updating beliefs based on prediction errors is central to how we navigate complex social environments. The brain's ability to rewire itself in response to new information allows for the modification of deeply held beliefs over time. For instance, repeated experiences of betrayal may lead to changes in the neural circuits associated with trust, making an individual more cautious in future interactions. Conversely, positive social interactions can strengthen neural pathways associated with trust and cooperation. At a collective level, shared belief systems - whether religious, cultural, or ideological - can shape entire societies' behavior and decision-making processes. These collective beliefs are essentially large-scale simulations and representational models shared across individuals, allowing for coordinated action and social cohesion. The brain's capacity for simulation enables individuals to internalize these collective beliefs and act in ways that align with societal norms and expectations. These collective beliefs are not static; they evolve through social interactions and are reinforced by cultural norms, rituals, and practices.

After having understood the individual brain as a representational simulation system, I hereby introduce the concept of "Distributed Nervous System". Society (any social group, at any scale) can be understood as a distributed representational framework/system. The individual brain can be considered as a single unit or node which builds up a distributed nervous system. The individual brain of all social animals has this inherent tendency to update itself and the brains of other members of the same species through various forms of

communication. The act of two humans speaking can be understood neurologically as two brains synchronizing and updating their information. This is evident across all forms of formal as well as informal communications. For the sake of explanation, we can say that whenever one brain is communicating with any other brain, it is either sharing a piece of information about reality which it feels the other brain is lacking, or it is asking for a piece of information which it is lacking about a relevant piece of reality - and no third possibility can be thought of. This tendency to synchronize information between brains within a species results in a distributed representational system where the simulation of reality is not limited to one brain alone, but is shared across a social group. The beliefs/assumptions about the existence of concepts like money, or a company, or a nation, or a family, etc. serves to prove that it requires a social group, or a "Distributed Nervous System" for collective beliefs or any other representational system to possibly even exist. Money functions only because more than one person believes in its exchange value, goodwill exists only because people believe in the value of a brand or company, the nation functions only because majority of its citizen believe in their constitution, and family has unity because its members believe of bonafide of other members, and so on. These collective concepts require a group of interconnected brains which synchronize with each other regularly to exist and to continue.

This Distributed Nervous System (DNS) dictates what will be considered as the objective "reality" for its individual units, for all practical purposes. Just like laws made by majority brains in a country will be forced upon the minority brains disagreeing with them, same can be said for people with abnormal personality traits will be labelled as having personality disorders by the large majority of brains who are defining what is normal reality of humans, the majority of brains in a DNS synchronize with each other and form a distributed model of reality, which might be incorrect. Same is well understood in biology that the reality our brain creates is not meant to reflect the actual reality but rather to create such a reality which maximizes our chances of survival and reproduction, as a species. An excellent relevant example is the present stance towards the LGBTQIA community, where in earlier versions of DSM we find Gender Identity Disorder, which was removed from DSM lately to accommodate the increasing acknowledgement of that community's existence in our shared model of reality. This synchronization of shared realities within a DNS not only dictates what is considered to be "normal" or "reality" by its unit brains, but this verily represents what we call as the culture, or civilization, or social norms. The acceptance and integration of Artificial Intelligence into daily life is also heavily influenced by and dependent upon the trust and shared understanding established by majority within our DNS/society. As AI systems become more sophisticated, they could potentially function as nodes within human DNS.

Another excellent example to understand Distributed Nervous Systems are social media (online or digital social networks). Facebook, Instagram, and similar platforms serve as digital extensions of the DNS, where individual users - akin to neurons in a biological system - interact and synchronize their perceptions of reality. These platforms amplify the collective influence by creating feedback loops of information, where shared posts, likes, comments, and algorithm-driven suggestions contribute to the shaping of a unified "social reality." On social media, the majority opinion often dominates, reinforcing popular narratives while suppressing minority viewpoints. This phenomenon mirrors the biological process in which neural networks strengthen connections through repeated use, leading to a collectively accepted reality. For instance, viral trends, misinformation, or societal movements gain momentum because the network of users collectively validates and propagates them. As a result, these platforms not only reflect but also actively shape cultural norms, opinions, and behaviors. The algorithms powering these networks act as artificial facilitators of synchronization within the DNS. By prioritizing content that aligns with user preferences or the majority view, these systems create digital echo chambers. In these environments, users are repeatedly exposed to similar ideas, reinforcing their beliefs and biases while marginalizing dissenting opinions. This can lead to a distorted model of reality, where the most amplified perspectives are mistaken for universal truths. However, social media also demonstrates the potential for decentralized and diverse DNS models. Platforms allow for the emergence of niche communities and minority voices, enabling individuals to connect and form their own micro-networks of shared reality. For example,

marginalized groups have used these spaces to advocate for their rights, educate others, and challenge mainstream narratives. The LGBTQIA community's use of social media to foster global solidarity and bring attention to issues previously ignored by the majority is a testament to the empowering potential of these networks.

This dynamic interplay between individual cognition and the collective model raises important ethical and philosophical questions. If the "objective" reality constructed by a DNS can evolve, how do we ensure that it evolves in a manner that is inclusive, equitable, and conducive to human flourishing? How do we reconcile the potential discrepancies between what is biologically "real" and what is perceived as real due to societal synchronization? One possible avenue for addressing these challenges is fostering decentralized systems that allow for greater diversity in shared realities without forcing complete conformity. For example, digital platforms could be designed to promote diverse narratives and counteract the echo chamber effect often observed in current social media models. By doing so, we might create a more resilient and adaptive DNS capable of accommodating a broader spectrum of realities. The concept of the Distributed Nervous Systems has profound implications for the design and implementation of a large spectrum of macro-level systems used by humans. Most important example is of the present education system in our DNS. Traditional education relies on a top-down model where knowledge is disseminated from a teacher to individual learners. In contrast, a DNS-based education model would emphasize collective learning as an interactive, participatory process. Knowledge would not simply flow from one source to many, but would instead be co-constructed and perpetually updated by a network of interconnected learners. For example, digital platforms could be redesigned as dynamic knowledge ecosystems, where students and educators continuously synchronize their understanding, collectively refining their mental models. Social media, often criticized for promoting superficial engagement, could be repurposed into "learning media" - platforms dedicated to fostering intellectual synchronization and collaborative problem-solving. This shift would not only enhance individual understanding but also strengthen collective intelligence, allowing societies to adapt more effectively to the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

Language (linguistics) serves as the most crucial tool within the DNS, acting as an interface between the representational simulation systems of individual brains. When one brain communicates with another, it essentially performs a process of reality dissection. The speaker's brain, having constructed an internal model of reality, uses language to break down this complex simulation into discrete components - subjects and objects - that can be verbally transmitted. This dissection process involves translating the rich, multidimensional internal representation into a linear sequence of words and concepts. The speaker's brain must categorize and segment its simulation, identifying key elements (subjects) and their attributes or actions (objects) that are relevant to the information being shared. Once dissected and encoded into language, this information is transmitted to the listener's brain. Upon receiving this linguistic input, the listener's brain then engages in a reconstruction process. It takes the received words and concepts - the subjects and objects - and integrates them into its own ongoing simulation of reality. This reconstruction is not a passive reception but an active process. The listener's brain, functioning as another node in the DNS, uses its existing representational framework to interpret and contextualize the received information. It may fill in gaps, make inferences, or adjust its internal model based on the new input. Through this process of dissection, transmission, and reconstruction, language enables the synchronization of reality simulations across multiple brains within a given DNS. It allows for the sharing and updating of internal models, contributing to the formation of collective beliefs and shared understandings that characterize the broader social reality. However, it's important to note that this process is inherently imperfect. The limitations of language mean that some aspects of the original simulation may be lost or distorted in the dissection and reconstruction process. This can lead to misunderstandings or variations in interpretation, which in turn contribute to the dynamic and sometimes divergent nature of shared realities within the DNS.

On an ending note, we can also understand that that the concept or phenomenon of "intelligence" is not something limited to an individual brain - what is considered intelligent and what is not considered intelligent with regards to an individual brain is defined by the DNS of which it is part of. Just as the DNS shapes the perception of reality of its individual brains, it also defines the parameters of what is considered intelligent behavior. The criteria for intelligence are not

fixed or universal, but rather socially constructed and continuously evolving within the distributed framework of a given society or group. And lastly, one brain can be part of multiple DNS, often overlapping. It suggests that individuals can exhibit different forms of intelligence depending on the specific DNS they are engaging with at any given time. A person might display high social intelligence within their community DNS, technical intelligence within their professional DNS, and creative intelligence within an artistic DNS. This multifaceted view of intelligence aligns with modern theories of multiple intelligences and emphasizes the importance of context in cognitive assessment.

Future Directions : The author (Dr. Nitnem Singh Sodhi) is working on developing further the framework of Distributed Nervous Systems. Subsequent papers in continuation to this shall be published in time.

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