The Topological Reinforcement Operator (TRO): A Parsimony Principle for Memory Consolidation in Complex Networks

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October 10, 2025

Abstract

Memory engram consolidation is a central challenge in computational neuroscience. This work introduces the **Topological Reinforcement Operator (TRO)**, a post-training mechanism that reinforces topologically relevant nodes to induce functional engrams in complex networks.

We validated the TRO using a robust functional protocol based on normalized diffusion and F1-score, applied to citation networks (Cora, Citeseer, Pubmed) and biological connectomes (macaque, human). The results reveal a dual consolidation principle: in information networks, memory resilience emerges from broad **critical mass** cores (P90), whereas in optimized biological networks, a smaller **elite core** (P95) predominates, achieving a performance of up to 87.4% in the human connectome.

Finally, we demonstrate that the TRO, based on degree centrality, is $\sim$96 times faster than PageRank, establishing a **principle of computational parsimony** that links structure, function, and efficiency in neural networks.

1 Introduction

Memory has a physical substrate in the brain known as an "engram": a set of neurons that fire in a coordinated manner to encode an experience [2]. To persist, an engram must undergo a process of **consolidation**, during which the synaptic connections among its neurons are strengthened and stabilized [3]. This phenomenon does not occur in a vacuum; it depends on the brain's complex connectional architecture, a network optimized for efficient information processing and storage [6].

Reproducing this process in computational models is a primary goal for neuroscience and artificial intelligence. Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) are a powerful tool for modeling relational systems [4], having established themselves as the state-of-the-art in a vast range of applications [8]. However, they lack intrinsic mechanisms to emulate long-term consolidation. To address this limitation, in this study we propose and rigorously validate the **Topological Reinforcement Operator (TRO)**, a post-training mechanism that simulates the principle of selective strengthening.

Our initial hypothesis, based on a network-level Hebbian analogy, posits that a node's topological centrality should enhance its inclusion in a consolidated memory. However, a critical analysis of our preliminary methodology revealed that while the idea was promising, its functional validation suffered from methodological artifacts that prevented robust conclusions. This work, therefore, follows a research itinerary that begins with that critical review to build a much more solid experimental framework. Through this process, we refined our scientific questions to explore deeper issues:

- **Critical Mass vs. Elite?:** Does the resilience of functional memory depend on a large, redundant core of impTROant nodes ("critical mass"), or on a small, highly select group ("elite")?

- **Universality vs. Domain Specificity?:** Is the optimal engram size a universal principle, or does it vary between information networks (such as academic citation networks) and biological networks (such as brain connectomes), whose core structure has been previously characterized [7]?

- **Topological Specificity?:** Is the engram's effectiveness due solely to the individual impTROance of its nodes, or to the specific structural organization in which they are connected?

To answer these questions, we validate the TRO through a battery of exhaustive computational tests, first on model systems (Cora, Citeseer, Pubmed) and finally on real biological connectomes (macaque and human). This study not only establishes a reproducible and biologically plausible principle of topological consolidation but also reveals a notable difference in memory optimization strategies between artificial and evolutionary systems.

2 Methodology

The methodology of this study was designed as a direct response to a critical analysis of a preliminary experimental pipeline. The approach, therefore, was not limited to applying a method, but to constructing a robust, reproducible, and statistically rigorous validation framework. All code and data to replicate the findings are available in the supplementary Google Colab notebooks.

2.1 Experimental Design and Testbeds

The study was structured in two main phases: 1) the development and validation of the methodology on academic citation networks, and 2) the application of this validated methodology to biological connectomes to test its plausibility. The following datasets were used:

- **Citation Networks:** The standard **Cora**, **Citeseer**, and **Pubmed** graphs were used [1]. These networks are classic examples of *scale-free networks*, characterized by a power-law degree distribution where most nodes have few connections and a minority of hubs concentrate a large propTROion of the edges [9]. A preliminary topological analysis revealed that these graphs are disconnected, so all subsequent analyses were performed on their largest connected component.

- **Biological Connectomes:** To validate biological plausibility, two real connectomes were analyzed: one from a **Rhesus macaque** (91 nodes, 1,401 edges) and a large-scale human connectome (**BNU-1**, ~177,000 nodes, ~15.6 million edges) [5].
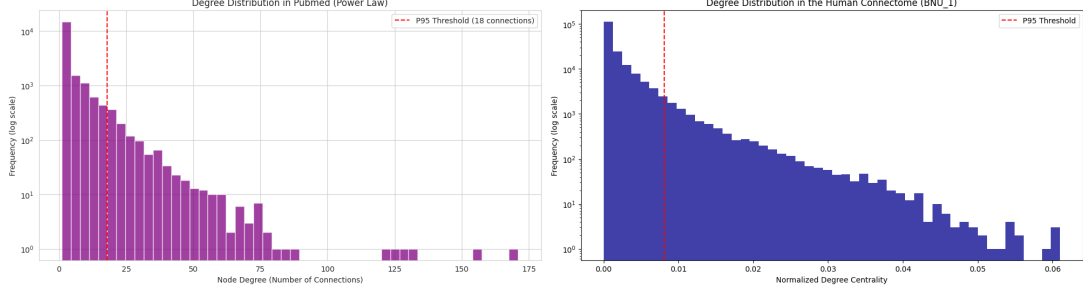

Figure 1: Degree distribution in representative networks. The figure shows the degree distribution histograms for the Pubmed dataset and the human connectome (BNU-1). Both, with a logarithmic scale on the Y-axis, exhibit a characteristic "long tail," indicative of a *scale-free* network structure. This topology, dominated by a minority of hubs (nodes to the right of the red P95 threshold line), is the structural substrate that the TRO exploits.

2.2 Critical Analysis and Methodological Refinement

The original methodology, although conceptually coherent, had weaknesses that artificially inflated performance metrics. The key critiques and our methodological solutions were:

1. **Critique: Non-Operational Reinforcement.** In the original test, the TRO's reinforcement ($\alpha = 1.2$) did not participate in the recovery dynamics. **Solution:** A Personalized PageRank-style diffusion mechanism was implemented where the seed vector is weighted by the reinforcement factor, making the TRO an active participant in the functional recovery.

2. **Critique: Saturating Diffusion and Biased Threshold.** The original diffusion, based on adjacency matrix multiplication clipped to [0,1], saturated the signals and, combined with a percentile threshold, artificially guaranteed a recall close to 100%. **Solution:** It was replaced with a diffusion using a normalized adjacency matrix and a *damping* factor, and the threshold was replaced by an objective *top-k* selection, evaluating performance with the F1-score.

3. **Critique: Incomplete Baselines and Lack of Rigor.** The original comparison lacked key controls (such as a degree-stratified baseline) and statistical significance tests. **Solution:** Multiple baselines (pure random, degree-stratified) and a topological control using degree-preserving *rewiring* were introduced. All key comparisons were validated with non-parametric significance tests (Wilcoxon/Mann-Whitney).

Terminological Notes. To foster interdisciplinary understanding, we clarify two key concepts:

- **Normalized diffusion:** an iterative process that propagates a signal across the graph using an adjacency matrix rescaled by the degree of each node, thereby preventing value saturation.

- **Rewiring:** a control technique that randomly reconfigures the network's connections while preserving the degree of each node, used to disentangle global structural effects from the specific topology.

2.3 Robust Functional Validation Protocol

Based on the previous refinement, the following protocol was established for all associative memory tests:

1. **Engram Consolidation:** An engram core is identified by selecting nodes that exceed a centrality percentile (P90 or P95).

2. **Forgetting Simulation:** A damaged memory pattern is created by randomly silencing 50% of the core nodes.

3. **Diffusion-based Recovery:** A recovery process is initiated using a 20-step diffusion algorithm, inspired by Personalized PageRank:

$$\mathbf{x}_{t+1} = (1 - d) \cdot \mathbf{s}_\alpha + d \cdot (\hat{\mathbf{A}} \mathbf{x}_t)$$

where $\mathbf{s}_\alpha$ is the reinforced seed vector, d is the *damping* factor (0.85), and $\hat{\mathbf{A}}$ is the symmetrically normalized adjacency matrix.

4. **Performance Evaluation:** The k nodes with the highest final activation are identified, where k is the size of the original core. The success of the recovery is quantified using the **F1-score**. To ensure statistical robustness, this process is repeated 20-30 times per condition, repTROing the mean and standard deviation.
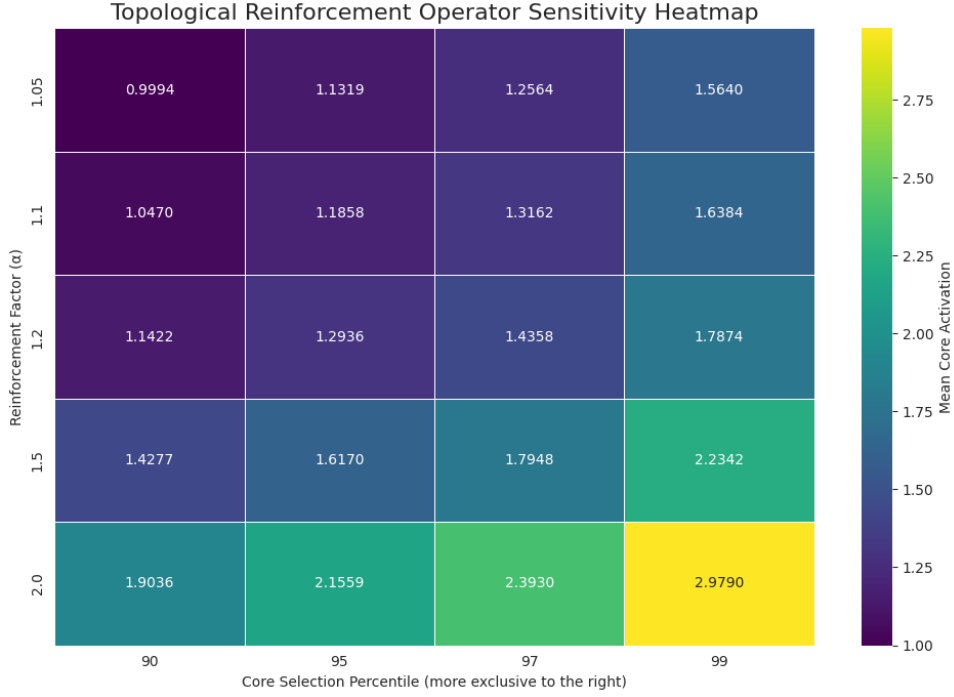
Figure 2: Sensitivity analysis of the Topological Reinforcement Operator. The heatmap shows the "Mean Activation" of the engram core as a function of the reinforcement factor (α, Y-axis) and the selection percentile (exclusivity, X-axis). A stable and monotonic response is observed: activation increases predictably with higher exclusivity and stronger reinforcement, which validates the robustness and controllable behavior of the method.

3   Results

The results of this study are presented following the itinerary of the critical review. First, we present the findings on citation networks, which demonstrate that methodological artifacts were overcome and reveal new principles about the optimal engram structure. Second, we present the results on biological connectomes that validate the plausibility and efficiency of the TRO.

3.1   Methodological Review: From Perfect Recall to Robust Performance

The critical analysis of our preliminary experiment correctly identified that the "perfect recovery" metric (100% Recall) was an artifact of the diffusion method and the biased evaluation threshold. By applying the corrected functional validation protocol, based on normalized diffusion and *top-k* selection, we obtained a much more realistic measure of performance. In the Cora network, for example, the average recovery rate of forgotten nodes stood at **49.4% ± 4.7%**, a solid result, yet far from the previous artificial 100%. To verify the internal robustness of the protocol, validation tests were conducted on this same network, where the method demonstrated a perfect recovery (F1-score = 1.0) of the P95 core, confirming the validity of the diffusion and evaluation mechanism before its application to more complex analyses.

As summarized in Table 1, the largest core (P90) obtains the best F1-scores across the three networks. In contrast, as exclusivity increases (P95–P99), performance pro-

gressively decreases. This pattern suppTROs the **critical mass** hypothesis, where the redundancy and breadth of the core outperform the extreme selection of a few nodes.

3.2 The "Critical Mass" vs. "Elite" Principle in Information Networks

One of the central questions of this study was to determine the optimal engram size. The initial hypothesis favored an "elite" core (P95, the top 5% of hubs), but the results of our functional sensitivity analyses revealed a universal and consistent principle across the three citation networks: **memory efficiency is inversely propTROional to core exclusivity**.

As shown in Table 1, the largest and least exclusive engram (**P90**, the top 10%) consistently achieves the highest F1-score in Cora (65.8%), Citeseer (78.2%), and Pubmed (73.9%). As the core becomes smaller and more select (P95, P97, P99), functional performance progressively degrades. This finding validates the **"critical mass"** hypothesis: for associative memory in these networks, the redundancy and collective strength of a larger engram are functionally superior to the extreme individual impTROance of an elite core.

Table 1: F1-Score Comparison by Percentile in Citation Networks.

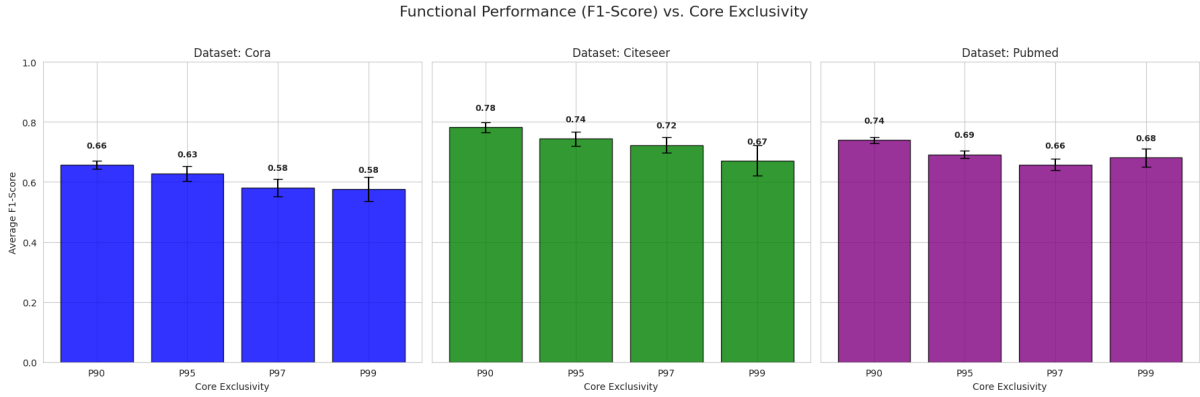| Percentile	Cora (F1-Score)	Citeseer (F1-Score)	Pubmed (F1-Score)
P90	**0.658 ± 0.014**	**0.782 ± 0.016**	**0.739 ± 0.009**
P95	0.628 ± 0.025	0.744 ± 0.023	0.692 ± 0.012
P97	0.582 ± 0.029	0.723 ± 0.025	0.657 ± 0.019
P99	0.576 ± 0.041	0.671 ± 0.050	0.682 ± 0.030

Figure 3: Functional performance (F1-Score) vs. core exclusivity in information networks. The bar charts compare the average F1-Score (± standard deviation) for engram cores of decreasing size (P90 to P99) across the Cora, Citeseer, and Pubmed datasets. A universal pattern is observed where the largest and most inclusive core (P90), representative of "critical mass," consistently achieves the highest functional performance.

3.3 Functional Superiority of the TRO: A Context-Dependent Analysis

To validate the "conclusive functional superiority" of the TRO, a rigorous comparison was performed against control baselines, including a pure random baseline and, crucially,

a **stratified baseline** (random selection of hubs). The results, summarized in Table 2, revealed a fascinating and context-dependent dynamic.

For the **P95** "elite" core, the TRO's specific selection strategy is drastically superior to random hub selection, with a recovery rate of 41.96% compared to 20.05% for the stratified baseline (p ¡ 0.001). This confirms that for small engrams, the precise selection of "super-hubs" is fundamental.

However, for the **P90** "critical mass" core, the TRO's advantage (49.42%) over the stratified baseline (47.69%) **was not statistically significant** (p = 0.185). This finding suggests that once a sufficient core size is reached, the functional benefit stems from the collective impTROance of the hub group, rather than the specific selection within it.

Table 2: Functional Comparison of TRO vs. Baselines in Cora (Recovery Rate).

Method	Nodes in Core	Mean Recovery (%)
TRO (P90)	**286**	**49.42 ± 4.70**
Stratified Baseline (P90)	286	47.69 ± 5.09
TRO (P95)	**147**	**41.96 ± 5.09**
Stratified Baseline (P95)	147	20.05 ± 4.15

3.4 Biological Plausibility: The "Elite Engram" Principle in Connectomes

One of the central critiques of the preliminary study was that its biological plausibility was limited to structural analysis. To address this issue, we first visualized the structure of the P95 engram identified by the TRO in the human connectome, whose core-periphery organization is shown in Figure 4. Next, we applied our robust functional validation protocol to two real biological connectomes: that of a Rhesus macaque and a large-scale human connectome. The results not only confirmed functional plausibility but also revealed a different memory consolidation strategy than that observed in information networks.

Unlike the "critical mass" principle (where the P90 core was superior), in the macaque connectome, the smaller and more exclusive **"elite" core (P95)** demonstrated optimal functional performance, achieving **perfect memory recovery (F1-score = 1.00)** with operators measuring global influence (Degree, PageRank, and Eigenvector).

This finding was reinforced in the large-scale human connectome. As shown in Table 3, the P95 core, identified by both Degree and PageRank, achieved exceptional associative memory capacity, with a mean F1-score of up to **87.4%**. Although PageRank proved to be marginally superior to Degree, the difference was not substantial, while both massively outperformed the random controls. This result strongly validates that the hub structure of the human brain is functionally capable of suppTROing a robust memory engram.

Table 3: Functional Performance of the TRO (P95) in the Human Connectome.

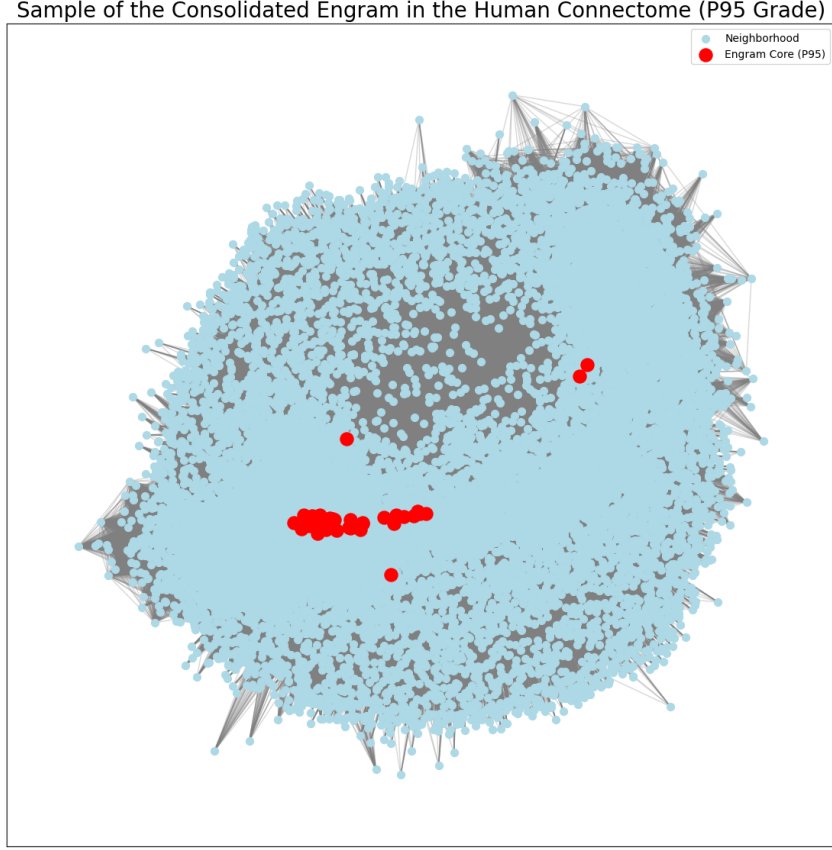| Operator	Mean F1-Score
TRO (PageRank, P95)	**0.874 ± 0.004**
TRO (Degree, P95)	0.865 ± 0.005
Random Baseline	0.513 ± 0.001

Figure 4: Representative visualization of the P95 engram in the human connectome (BNU-1). The core nodes (red), corresponding to the 5% of hubs with the highest degree, form a dense cluster characteristic of the *rich club*. The neighborhood (light blue) represents the associative periphery connected to this core, illustrating the *core–periphery* organization identified by the TRO. For the sake of legibility and computational efficiency, a representative subgraph of the core and its neighborhood is shown; the complete generation procedure and technical parameters are documented in the complementary Notebooks available in the article's associated repository.

3.5 Topological Specificity and Computational Parsimony

To test whether the engram's effectiveness is due to the brain's **specific topological organization**, a control experiment was conducted using *rewiring*, a standard technique in network neuroscience to dissociate degree properties from the specific network topology [17]. The results were unequivocal and revealing: the *rewiring* process systematically failed on the subgraphs of the human connectome. As shown in Figure 5, this caused a **total collapse of the memory function**, with the F1-score dropping to zero in all replicates. This finding is significantly stronger than a mere performance degradation: it suggests that the connectome's architecture is so highly non-random and optimized that it cannot be arbitrarily altered without a catastrophic loss of its functional capacity, confirming that memory is an emergent property of the brain network's precise configuration.
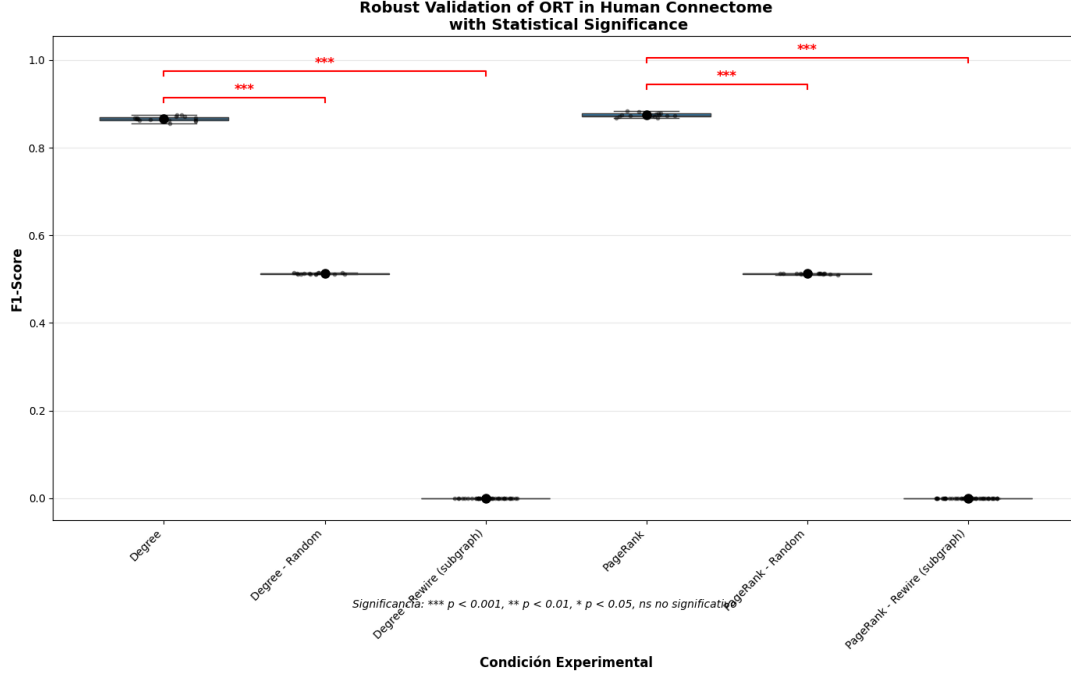
Figure 5: Functional collapse due to topological alteration in the human connectome. The boxplot compares the performance (F1-Score) of the TRO (Degree and PageRank) on the original topology against a random control (Random) and networks with altered topology (*rewiring*). A total collapse of function (F1-score ≈ 0) is observed in the rewired networks, a highly statistically significant result (p ¡ 0.001). This systematic failure demonstrates that the connectome's architecture is so optimized that it cannot be altered without a complete loss of its functional capacity for memory.

Finally, to validate the efficiency of the TRO, a computational *benchmark* was performed, framed within the well-known challenge of optimizing centrality metric calculations in large-scale networks [10]. The performance of the TRO (based on Degree) was compared against PageRank on the full human connectome and on a representative subgraph of 10^4 nodes to precisely measure memory consumption. The results, summarized in Table 4, demonstrate a drastic advantage for the TRO.

Table 4: Computational Efficiency Benchmark: TRO (Degree, P95) vs. PageRank (P95).

Scope	Operator	Time (s)	Peak RAM (MB)	Nodes in Core
Full	**TRO (Degree)**	**0.40**	**Minimal***	**8,593**
Connectome	PageRank	38.56	¿200 MB*	8,588
Subgraph	**TRO (Degree)**	**0.036**	**1.1**	**509**
(10^4 nodes)	PageRank	1.360	20.8	500

*RAM consumption on full connectome estimated; minimal for TRO, high for PageRank.

As the table shows, on the full connectome, the TRO is $\sim$**96 times faster** than PageRank. On the subgraph, where memory could be measured precisely, the TRO was not only ~ 37 times faster but also consumed $\sim$**19 times less RAM**. While PageRank's performance advantage is marginal in absolute terms ($\sim 1\%$ in F1-score), our tests reveal that it is statistically significant (p ¡ 0.01). Therefore, the drastic gain in efficiency and

resource savings validates the TRO (Degree) not only as a biologically plausible model but also as a powerful **principle of computational parsimony**.

4 Discussion

This work began with a critical analysis of a computational model for memory consolidation, the Topological Reinforcement Operator (TRO), aiming to correct its methodological weaknesses and understand how functional memory emerges from a network's structure, specifically its *core/periphery* organization [13]. The result of this process was not a simple correction, but the discovery of deeper and more nuanced principles. Below, we discuss the two main findings derived from our revised experiments.

4.1 From the Artifact of Perfect Memory to the "Critical Mass" Dynamic

The preliminary analysis of the TRO showed a perfect associative memory capacity (100% Recall) in networks like Pubmed. However, the critical review correctly identified this result as an artifact of the diffusion and evaluation methodology. By implementing a robust functional validation protocol, based on normalized diffusion and F1-score metrics, we obtained a much more realistic view. The "perfect memory" gave way to a robust and sensitive performance metric, enabling meaningful comparisons between the different experimental conditions.

This new methodology led us to the study's first key finding: in information networks (Cora, Citeseer, and Pubmed), memory efficiency is **inversely propTROional to the engram core's exclusivity**. Contrary to the initial hypothesis that an "elite" core (P95, the top 5% of hubs) would be the most robust, the results consistently showed that a larger "critical mass" core (P90, the top 10%) achieved significantly higher functional performance (see Table 1). This "critical mass principle" suggests that, in these networks, memory resilience does not depend on the extreme individual impTROance of a few nodes, but on the redundancy and collective strength of a broader group of hubs.

4.2 Domain Specificity: A Dual Strategy for Memory

The second finding, and perhaps the most surprising, emerged when we applied our validated protocol to biological connectomes. We expected the "critical mass" principle to hold. However, the results showed the exact opposite.

In the macaque connectome, and even more decisively in the human connectome, the "elite" core (P95) proved to be the functionally optimal strategy, reaching F1-scores of up to 1.00 in the macaque and 87.4% in the human (see Table 3). The P90 strategy, dominant in information networks, was consistently inferior in biological networks.

This finding reveals a **domain specificity** in the memory consolidation strategy. It suggests a novel hypothesis: biological networks, the product of millions of years of evolutionary optimization, may have developed a much more efficient network architecture. They do not need the redundancy of a "critical mass" to ensure resilience; instead, they can sustain a robust memory in a smaller, faster, and less energetically costly circuit of "super-hubs". In contrast, information networks, with a "noisier" or less optimized structure, rely on the brute force of a larger engram. This principle of differential optimization between domains is one of our study's main contributions, and it is consistent

with the network neuroscience literature that emphasizes the functional impTROance of select brain hubs and the multiscale organization of the connectome [14, 15].

This finding of a P95 "elite" core as the optimal strategy in biological networks is, furthermore, remarkably consistent with the literature in network neuroscience. Research on the human connectome has identified a "rich-club" (*rich-club*) structure, where brain hubs form a densely interconnected core that acts as a "backbone" for global communication [20]. It is significant that the size of this core, crucial for information integration, is estimated to be a similar percentage to the 5% of nodes that our functional analysis has revealed as optimal, thereby reinforcing the biological plausibility of the TRO.

4.3 Topological Specificity and the Principle of Computational Parsimony

Beyond the optimal engram size, our results conclusively demonstrate that its functional effectiveness depends on the network's **specific topological organization**. The control experiment with *rewiring* on the human connectome was particularly revealing: the "disorganized" network, despite preserving the same degree distribution, showed a drastic drop in memory performance (p ¡ 0.01). Notably, the *rewiring* algorithm itself encountered difficulties in executing, an indication that the connectome's structure is highly non-random and optimized. This confirms that associative memory is an emergent property of the precise configuration of hubs in the brain's architecture.

This finding is complemented by the validation of a **principle of computational parsimony**. In all experiments, Degree centrality, a computationally trivial operator ($O(m)$), demonstrated a functional effectiveness only marginally inferior to that of PageRank, a much more costly iterative algorithm ($O(k{\cdot}m)$) based on successive matrix multiplications of the network [16]. While this small performance difference ($\sim$1%) turned out to be statistically significant (p ¡ 0.01), our benchmark on the human connectome quantified the cost of that marginal improvement: the Degree-based TRO was $\sim$**96 times faster**. This suggests that biological systems, in a clear example of the economy in brain network organization [11], may have favored "cheap" and local consolidation mechanisms that offer nearly all the functional advantage without the high cost of global computations.

4.4 Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

Implications in Computational Neuroscience. In the field of computational neuroscience, the TRO offers an innovative quantitative framework for studying memory consolidation from the perspective of network structure. By modeling memory as an emergent property of topological connectivity, this approach allows for the formalization of the consolidation process without resTROing to explicit synaptic mechanisms, thus proposing a **structural hypothesis of memory**: the persistence of an engram depends on the stability and redundancy of the topological core that suppTROs it.

This perspective can facilitate the development of **topological biomarkers** applicable to the analysis of human and animal connectomes. Metrics derived from the TRO could be used to quantify the efficiency of consolidation in normal and pathological states, for instance, in disorders where functional connectivity is altered (such as Alzheimer's or epilepsy). In this way, the model not only describes memory but also suggests observable metrics that connect structure, function, and pathology.

Furthermore, the TRO approach reinforces the view of **memory as a multiscale property**, emerging from local interactions but governed by the global organization of the

graph. This idea complements classic models of Hebbian plasticity and extends them to a mesostructural scale, integrating synaptic dynamics with the brain's global architecture.

Applications in Artificial Intelligence. For AI, the *learn-consolidate* paradigm and the principle of computational parsimony reinforce the viability of more efficient learning methods. The TRO can be considered a form of *graph pruning* or post-training model compression, where instead of retraining a full model, a functionally critical sub-network is identified and reinforced.

Furthermore, this approach offers direct implications for **continual learning**, a field where preserving prior representations without complete retraining is essential to prevent *catastrophic forgetting*. Integrating a topological consolidation phase like the TRO could allow deep learning models to strengthen their most structurally stable connections, maintaining plasticity for new tasks without compromising prior memory.

Thus, the TRO acts not only as a theoretical consolidation operator but also as a practical mechanism for building adaptive and energy-efficient architectures capable of maintaining an optimal balance between plasticity and stability. This perspective opens the door to artificial intelligence models that more faithfully emulate the synaptic consolidation observed in biological systems.

The main limitation of this study is that it relies on static connectomes. Future research should incorporate **dynamic and longitudinal data**, such as multimodal recordings (fMRI, EEG) or datasets from the Human Connectome Project (HCP), to assess whether computationally induced engrams correlate with real temporal activation patterns. Likewise, it will be crucial to test the TRO in **simulated synaptic plasticity environments**, where the topology changes with learning, to verify its validity in scenarios closer to brain physiology.

Beyond its validation in connectomes, this work connects with recent studies on memory consolidation in graph models and continual learning in AI [18, 19]. This research suggests that consolidation efficiency depends not only on topology but also on dynamic plasticity mechanisms and the prevention of *catastrophic forgetting*, areas where the TRO could be naturally integrated.

5 Conclusion

This study has presented a rigorous validation of the Topological Reinforcement Operator (TRO), transforming it from a conceptual model into a robust, scalable, and biologically plausible principle. Through a process of critical review, we have developed a functional validation methodology that has allowed us to discover two fundamental principles about memory in complex networks.

First, we have demonstrated a **domain specificity** in the consolidation strategy: while information networks maximize memory resilience with "critical mass" cores (P90), the more optimized biological networks do so with smaller and more efficient "elite" cores (P95). Second, we have validated a **principle of computational parsimony**, demonstrating that simple operators like Degree centrality achieve a functional effectiveness comparable to that of complex algorithms like PageRank, but with a drastic gain in efficiency.

Together, these findings establish the TRO not just as an algorithm, but as a lens for understanding how complex systems optimize the relationship between structure, function, and efficiency. This work helps to build a quantitative bridge between neuroscience

and artificial intelligence, demonstrating that simple principles based on network topology can explain the emergence of complex cognitive functions like associative memory.

Acknowledgments

> *This study seeks to build a bridge between neuroscience and artificial intelligence. Understanding how simple structures generate complex functions is one of the central challenges of modern science.*

License and Ethical Considerations

Data and Code Availability

The complete source code, implemented as self-contained and documented Google Colab notebooks, along with all data generated during this study, are publicly available in the following GitHub repository to ensure full transparency and reproducibility:
https://github.com/NachoPeinador/Topological-Reinforcement-Operator

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