NEURAL NETWORK-BASED CONTROL ALGORITHMS IN ROBOTICS

Qobilova Ma'mura Karimova
4th-year student, Primary Education Department
Shahrisabz State Pedagogical Institute
yoldashevabdijamil@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper examines neural network-based control algorithms as applied to robotic systems, exploring their theoretical foundations, practical implementations, and comparative advantages over classical control methods. The study analyzes key architectures including feedforward networks, recurrent neural networks (RNN), convolutional neural networks (CNN), and deep reinforcement learning frameworks used for robotic motion planning, adaptive control, and sensor fusion. Findings suggest that neural network controllers achieve superior performance in non-linear, high-dimensional environments while demonstrating greater adaptability to environmental uncertainty. Challenges such as computational cost, interpretability, and real-time deployment constraints are also discussed.*

Keywords*:* *neural networks, robotics, control algorithms, deep reinforcement learning, adaptive control, motion planning, autonomous systems.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Robotics has undergone a profound transformation over recent decades, driven in large part by advances in artificial intelligence and, specifically, the rapid development of neural network methodologies. Traditional robotic control systems relied on deterministic, model-based approaches such as PID (Proportional-Integral-Derivative) controllers and linear state-space feedback methods. While effective in structured and predictable environments, these classical approaches suffer from significant limitations when applied to complex, dynamic, or partially observable real-world conditions [1].

Neural networks, inspired by the biological architecture of the human brain, offer a fundamentally different paradigm. Rather than relying on an explicit mathematical model of the environment, neural network-based controllers learn control policies directly from data, enabling generalization to previously unseen situations [2]. This property, known as data-driven adaptability, has made neural networks increasingly central to robotic research and industrial deployment.

The intersection of neural computation and robotic control has given rise to a rich field of inquiry encompassing motion planning, manipulation, navigation, human-robot interaction, and autonomous decision-making. This paper provides a structured overview of the most significant neural network architectures and training paradigms applied in robotic control, and evaluates their performance relative to classical methods across several benchmark tasks [3].

2. Background and Related Work

The use of artificial neural networks (ANNs) in control systems dates back to the early 1990s, when researchers began exploring their potential as universal function approximators for nonlinear system identification and control [4]. Pioneering work by Narendra and Parthasarathy established theoretical foundations for neural network-based adaptive control, demonstrating that networks could learn inverse dynamics models of robotic manipulators [5].

The resurgence of deep learning in the 2010s renewed interest in neural control systems. Convolutional neural networks (CNNs), originally developed for image classification, found application in robotic vision and object manipulation [6]. Simultaneously, recurrent architectures such as Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks proved effective for temporal sequence modeling, enabling robots to handle tasks requiring memory of past states [7].

The emergence of deep reinforcement learning (DRL) marked a watershed moment in robotic control. Mnih et al. demonstrated that deep Q-networks (DQN) could achieve superhuman performance on Atari games from raw pixel inputs [8], inspiring direct application to continuous robotic control domains. Algorithms such as Trust Region Policy Optimization (TRPO), Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), and Soft Actor-Critic (SAC) subsequently became standard tools for training robotic locomotion and manipulation policies [9].

3. Neural Network Architectures for Robotic Control

3.1 Feedforward Networks and Inverse Dynamics Models

Multilayer perceptrons (MLPs) represent the foundational architecture for neural network control. In the context of robotics, they are commonly employed to approximate the inverse dynamics model of a manipulator—mapping desired accelerations to required joint torques. Given sufficient training data, an MLP can capture complex nonlinear relationships between joint configurations, velocities, accelerations, and required torques that would be intractable for analytical models to represent exactly [10]. The key advantage of this approach is that the controller requires no explicit knowledge of inertia matrices or Coriolis terms; the network implicitly encodes this information from observed trajectory data.

3.2 Recurrent Neural Networks for Sequential Control

Many robotic tasks are inherently sequential, requiring integration of information over time. Recurrent neural networks (RNNs), particularly LSTM and Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU) architectures, address this need by maintaining internal state across time steps [11]. In robotic applications, LSTMs have been applied to contact-rich manipulation tasks, where the robot must infer object properties from a sequence of force-torque observations, as well as to localization problems where odometry and sensor readings must be integrated over time to estimate pose [12].

3.3 Convolutional Neural Networks for Perception-Action Pipelines

Visual perception is central to robotic operation in unstructured environments. CNNs excel at extracting hierarchical spatial features from image data, enabling robots to recognize objects, estimate poses, detect obstacles, and interpret scene semantics [13]. End-to-end learning pipelines that directly map raw camera images to motor commands—pioneered by NVIDIA's DAVE-2 system for autonomous driving—have been adapted for robotic grasping and assembly tasks. Such approaches eliminate the need for hand-engineered feature extractors and allow the system to discover task-relevant visual representations autonomously [14].

3.4 Deep Reinforcement Learning

Deep reinforcement learning unifies neural function approximation with the reinforcement learning framework, enabling agents to learn control policies through interaction with an environment mediated by reward signals [15]. In robotic control, DRL has achieved remarkable results in tasks including legged locomotion, dexterous hand manipulation, robotic soccer, and warehouse logistics. The SAC algorithm, which maximizes both expected reward and policy entropy, has become particularly prominent for continuous control due to its sample efficiency and stability [16]. Sim-to-real transfer techniques—training policies in simulation and deploying on physical hardware—have further expanded the practical applicability of DRL methods [17].

4. Comparison with Classical Control Methods

Classical control methods such as PID, model predictive control (MPC), and computed torque control remain widely deployed in industrial robotics due to their theoretical guarantees, interpretability, and ease of tuning. However, they face fundamental limitations: PID controllers assume linear dynamics and struggle with high-dimensional state spaces; MPC requires accurate system models and imposes substantial computational overhead at high frequencies [18].

Neural network controllers, by contrast, are model-free and can represent arbitrarily complex mappings. Empirical evaluations on benchmark manipulation and locomotion tasks consistently demonstrate that DRL-based controllers outperform PID baselines in terms of task success rate and generalization to novel conditions [19]. However, neural controllers sacrifice the formal stability guarantees that classical methods provide. Hybrid approaches—such as neural network augmentation of model-based controllers, or using Lyapunov-based constraints to ensure safe neural control policies—represent an active area of research aimed at combining the strengths of both paradigms [20].

5. Applications in Robotic Systems

Neural network-based control algorithms have found deployment across a broad spectrum of robotic applications. In industrial manipulation, companies such as Fanuc and ABB have integrated neural learning components into their arm controllers to improve adaptability to product variability [21]. In mobile robotics and autonomous vehicles, end-to-end neural driving models process sensor streams to generate steering and acceleration commands, with recent systems achieving competitive performance on benchmark driving datasets [22].

Legged robots represent one of the most challenging application domains, requiring coordination of many degrees of freedom in the presence of contact dynamics and terrain variability. Boston Dynamics and ETH Zurich have demonstrated neural locomotion controllers that enable quadrupedal robots to traverse highly irregular terrain by learning from simulation [23]. In medical robotics, neural networks have been applied to surgical instrument control, enabling autonomous tissue manipulation and suture tying with millimeter precision [24].

Human-robot interaction represents another domain benefiting from neural control approaches. Neural networks trained on human motion data can generate predictive models of human intent, enabling collaborative robots (cobots) to anticipate and accommodate human actions in shared workspaces, thereby improving safety and efficiency [25].

6. Challenges and Limitations

Despite their considerable achievements, neural network-based robotic controllers face several important challenges. Sample efficiency remains a persistent concern: DRL algorithms typically require millions of environmental interactions to converge, making direct training on physical hardware prohibitively expensive and time-consuming [26]. Sim-to-real transfer mitigates this but introduces its own challenges through the reality gap—differences between simulated and real-world dynamics that can cause policy degradation upon deployment.

Interpretability and safety certification present significant obstacles to deployment in safety-critical applications. Unlike classical controllers whose behavior can be formally analyzed, neural networks are black-box systems whose decision processes are not easily auditable [27]. This limits their adoption in domains such as medical robotics, aerospace, and nuclear facility maintenance, where formal verification of control behavior is required. Adversarial robustness is a related concern: small perturbations to sensor inputs can induce large, unpredictable changes in neural controller outputs [28].

Computational requirements impose practical constraints on real-time deployment. Deep neural networks with millions of parameters may require GPU acceleration to achieve the inference latencies demanded by high-frequency control loops. Research into model compression, quantization, and neuromorphic hardware aims to reduce these barriers [29].

7. Future Directions

Several promising research directions are shaping the future of neural network-based robotic control. Meta-learning and few-shot adaptation methods aim to enable robots to rapidly adapt to new tasks and environments from minimal experience, addressing the sample efficiency bottleneck [30]. Neuro-symbolic integration—combining neural perception and decision-making with symbolic reasoning and planning—offers potential pathways toward more interpretable and verifiable control systems [31].

Foundation models and large-scale pretraining, which have revolutionized natural language processing, are beginning to influence robotics through models such as RT-2 and PaLM-E, which leverage internet-scale visual and linguistic pretraining to generalize robotic manipulation skills across diverse tasks [32]. The integration of physics-informed neural networks (PINNs) with control frameworks promises to combine the expressiveness of neural models with physical consistency constraints, potentially enabling formal safety guarantees [33].

8. Conclusion

Neural network-based control algorithms have fundamentally expanded the capabilities of robotic systems, enabling adaptive, data-driven control in complex, high-dimensional environments where classical methods encounter fundamental limitations. Through architectures ranging from feedforward networks to deep reinforcement learning agents, neural controllers have achieved state-of-the-art performance across manipulation, locomotion, navigation, and human-robot interaction domains.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in sample efficiency, interpretability, safety certification, and real-time deployment. Addressing these challenges through hybrid neuro-classical architectures, meta-learning, and physics-informed methods represents the frontier of current research. As the field continues to mature, neural network-based control is poised to become the dominant paradigm for robotic intelligence in both industrial and service applications.

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