

Stephen John Cowley, professor emeritus SDU: “LLMs for thinking; the role of the living subject”

Abstract:

Distributed cognitive systems (Hutchins, 1995) link technologies with multi-scaled, living human subjects (Madsen, 2017). In pursuing *thinking*, one brings a systemic lens (Cowley & Vallée-Tourangeau, 2017) to the person-in-the-system (Fester-Seeger, 2025). In *LLMs for thinking*, I bring this to how –and whether –LLMs can shape quality “thoughts.” First, I look beyond normalcy (Cowley, 2025) or contextually relevant LLM output. While having many uses, LLMs can also generate valued markers. They draw on routines without being routine or, as argued by Pinna (in prep.), they mimic Wittgenstein’s “going on.” To this end, LLM input/output can be seen–and, as indeed, designed for – distinction making (Watson, in prep). Rather than present as “text,” it invites recursively coordinated judging. As a living subject–especially an expert –one can bring feeling, thinking and judging to LLM prompts and nudgings. Simply, aggregates of distinctions trigger (very rapid) bodimental activity. Attending to gaps, infelicities, surprises, errors etc. meshes machine output with observation and what we have come to treat as discursively “known.” The results enable novel “thoughts” with implications for both design and critique of anonymous, social media.

Bionote:

Stephen J. Cowley (b. 1955) is Emeritus Professor of Organisational Cognition (University of Southern Denmark). His research pursues a distributed view of life, language, and cognition, how social organizing shapes human individuation, radical ecolinguistics, and how technoscience impacts on living. His publications count numerous articles and special issues, as well as the edited volume *Cognition beyond the brain* (Springer, 2017)

Funded by Center of Culture and Technology and Department of Culture and Language.

Time: 29. April, 2026 at 14:00-16:00: OD 095 Conference room.