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Title: Calcium activation of frequency dependent temporally phasic, localized, and dense population of cortical neurons by continuous electrical stimulation

Nicholas J. Michelson[1,2], James R. Eles[1,3], Riazul Islam[1,3], Alberto L. Vazquez[1,3,4,5,6], Kip A Ludwig[7,8], Takashi DY Kozai[1,3,6,9,10*]

1. Department of Bioengineering, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
2. Department of Psychiatry, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z3, CA
3. Center for the Neural Basis of Cognition, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
4. Department of Radiology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
5. Department of Neurobiology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
6. Center for Neuroscience, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
7. Department of Biomedical Engineering, University of Wisconsin Madison
8. Department of Neurological Surgery, University of Wisconsin Madison
9. McGowan Institute of Regenerative Medicine, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA
10. NeuroTech Center, University of Pittsburgh Brain Institute, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA

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***Correspondence:** 208 Center for Biotechnology and Bioengineering; 300 Technology Dr. Pittsburgh, PA 15219 tdk18@pitt.edu

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Abstract

Electrical stimulation of the brain has become a mainstay of fundamental neuroscience research and an increasingly prevalent clinical therapy. Despite decades of use in basic neuroscience research over acute time scales, and the growing prevalence of neuromodulation therapies, gaps in knowledge regarding activation or inactivation of neural elements over time have limited its ability to adequately interpret evoked downstream responses or fine-tune stimulation parameters to focus on desired responses. In this work, *in vivo* two-photon microscopy was used to image Thy1-GCaMP activity in layer 2/3 neurons of S1 cortex during 30 s of continuous electrical stimulation at varying frequencies. We show that during continuous stimulation, stimulation frequency influences a distinct spatial and temporal pattern of somatic activation. Our results elucidate conflicting results from prior studies reporting either dense spherical activation of somas biased towards somas near the electrode, or sparse activation of somas at a distance via axons near the electrode. These findings indicate that the neural element specific temporal response local to the stimulating electrode changes as a function of applied charge density and frequency. This temporal patterning needs to be considered to properly interpret downstream circuit responses or determining mechanisms of action in basic science experiments or clinical therapeutic applications.

Significance Statement (100 words)

Microstimulation of small populations of neurons has the potential to ameliorate symptoms associated with several neurological disorders. However, the specific mechanisms by which microstimulation elicits therapeutic responses are unclear. This work examines the effects of continuous microstimulation on the local population of neurons surrounding the implanted electrode. Stimulation was found to elicit spatiotemporal neuronal responses in a frequency dependent manner. These findings suggest that stimulation frequency may be an important consideration for applications in research or therapy. Further research aimed at understanding these neuronal activation properties may provide insight into the mechanistic action of continuous microstimulation.

Introduction

Understanding the complexity of the nervous systems requires the ability to readout detailed measurements from controlled inputs[1-4]. While many new techniques and technologies are emerging, electrical stimulation remains one of the oldest and most widely used methods for directly interfacing and driving the nervous system[5-9]. The ability to directly apply electrical potentials to individual nerves has helped identify biophysical properties of nerves and neurons[10,11], and has been crucial in understanding the organization of the brain[12,13]. These studies also opened the door to electrical stimulation approaches for therapeutic applications[14]. Electrical stimulation has been used for hearing[15-18], vision[19,20], and somatosensory restoration[21,22], and to treat movement disorders[23-26], chronic pain[27-30], and epilepsy[31,32]. More recently there has been an expansion of neuromodulation clinical trials, with over 1000 clinical trials registered on clinicaltrials.gov utilizing implanted or non-invasive electrodes to activate/inactivate nervous tissue and treat diverse conditions such as Tourette's syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, Alzheimer's disease, and stroke. These clinical applications further motivate the development of improved chronically implanted electrical stimulation devices[33].

Despite its growing prevalence in scientific and clinical research, there is limited understanding of how electrical stimulation directly interacts with the complex milieu of neuronal and non-neuronal cells in the brain near the electrode. In acute mapping experiments of peripheral nerve fibers, short pulses of electrical stimulation were hypothesized to activate a small sphere of fibers in the local vicinity of the electrode[34-37], with increases in amplitude increasing the volume of the sphere activated. When applying cathodic leading stimulation waveforms, increasing the amplitude could also cause a small zone of inactivation near the electrode tip, due to the generation of virtual anodes more distant from the tip hyperpolarizing axons, ultimately preventing the propagation of any action potentials[35]. In contrast, recent experiments utilizing 2-photon calcium imaging to visualize the activation of neural elements in cortex near the electrode site found that electrical stimulation activated a sparse population of neuronal somas distant from the electrode site[38]. These experiments demonstrated that electrical stimulation activates a much smaller volume of neural processes around the electrode tip, which in turn activate the connected soma[38].

Although changes in pulse amplitude are widely understood to alter the area of activation within the vicinity of the electrode, the extent to which different stimulation frequencies and pulse train durations affect local neuronal

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responses remains less explored. In this study, *in vivo* multiphoton calcium imaging of GCaMP6 transgenic mice was employed to elucidate how neuronal elements near an implanted electrode respond to different electrical stimulation frequencies over the course of a longer pulse train. Transgenic GCaMP6 mice allow for the probing of neuronal activity with high fidelity (SNR) in a large proportion of cortical excitatory neurons without the need for exogenous calcium chelators. Stimulation was carried out at different frequencies using a 30 second burst of cathodic leading symmetric pulses, with a 50 µs pulse width/phase and pulse amplitudes within the established Shannon safety limits to avoid tissue damage (Shannon criteria of *k* between 0.12 and 1.3, 2.5 nC per phase). Based on the results of Histed et al[38] and Stoney et al[34], we hypothesized that both sparse and distributed activation would occur in S1 cortex for continuous electrical stimulation at sufficient charge/phase. Our results support this hypothesis, but also demonstrate that different neural elements (neurites, soma) in the vicinity of the electrode differ in their responses as a function of time (stimulation onset, during, and after stimulation), space, and stimulation frequency. These data show a complex response profile near the electrode to electrical stimulation that may have significant implications for the design of electrical neuromodulation experiments and therapies. Hence it is not surprising that different studies utilizing different charge/phase, frequencies, and time points during stimulation for analysis yield conflicting results.

Methods

Surgery and electrode implantation

Transgenic mice C57BL/6J-Tg(Thy1 GCaMP6s)GP4.3Dkim/J (n=5, male, 22–28 g, Jackson Laboratories; Bar Harbor, ME) were used in this experiment. All animals were induced with an anesthetic mixture consisting of 75 mg/kg ketamine and 7 mg/kg xylazine administered intraperitoneally and updated with 40 mg/kg as needed. Craniotomies ~4 mm were made over each somatosensory cortex and electrodes were implanted at a 30º angle as previously described[39-44]. Electrical stimulation was conducted through a single-shank 16-channel Michigan style functional silicon probes with 703 µm^2 electrode sites (NeuroNexus Technologies, Ann Arbor, MI). All experimental protocols were approved by the University of Pittsburgh, Division of Laboratory Animal Resources and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee in accordance with the standards for humane animal care as set by the Animal Welfare Act and the National Institutes of Health Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals.

Two-photon Imaging

A two-photon laser scanning microscope (Bruker, Madison, WI) and an OPO laser (Insight DS+; Spectra-Physics, Menlo Park, CA) tuned to a wavelength of 920 nm at 15 mW was used for the entirety of this study. A16X 0.8 numerical aperture water immersion objective lens (Nikon Instruments, Melville, NY) was selected for its 3 mm working distance. Imaging was carried out over a 407 x 407 µm ROI, collected with a 512 x 512 pixel resolution. Before imaging sessions, animals were injected IP with 0.1 ml of 1mg/ml SR101 for visualization of blood vessels and electrode contacts. Imaging plane was positioned 10 µm above the electrode site, 120-150 µm below the surface of the brain. In order to image neural dynamic during electrical stimulation, time series images were recorded at 30 Hz and 2x optical zoom. Imaging plane for time series were set right over the electrode contact, so that the stimulating contact is visible during imaging session.

Electrical stimulation

Stimulation protocols and imaging typically were performed 20 minutes after electrode implantation to allow time for displaced tissue to settle. A-M System 2100, single channel Isolated Pulse Stimulator (A-M Systems, Sequim, WA) or TDT IZ2 stimulator on an RZ5D system (Tucker-Davis Technologies, Alachua, FL) was used to apply current controlled cathodic leading biphasic symmetric (50 µs each phase) electrical microsimulation at 10 Hz, 30 Hz, 50 Hz, 75 Hz, 90 Hz, 130 Hz and 250 Hz frequency and stimulating current of 50 µA. In one animal, 100 µA was required to evoke a visible response. Amplitude of stimulation was selected based on minimum current required to evoke activation during two photon live scanning. Charge/phase, charge density/phase and k values were calculated based on the Shannon's equation[45]. The *k* value used during stimulation was between -0.12 and 1.3, well within safety limits to avoid tissue damage. After collecting 2 min of resting state activity, electrical stimulation was imaged for 2 min at each frequency, which included 30 s of pre-stimulation baseline, 30s of stimulation and 60s of post-stimulation baseline. An additional 3 minutes was required between each trial to write the data onto the drive after data collection. The two-photon microscope was synchronized to the stimulator via transistor-transistor logic and 30 s stimulation was carried out after a 30 s delay from the start of the T-series. Stimulation was carried out in the order of increasing frequency and were not repeated in the same animal.

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However, in two animals, 10 Hz stimulus was repeated after running the full frequency sequence to determine if early microstimulation trials changed the neuronal response properties for subsequent trials. The second 10 Hz stimulation showed similar activation patterns to the first 10 Hz stimulation.

Data analysis

Identification of activated neurons

Time series images collected during experiments were converted to a single tiff image file using ImageJ (NIH). The tiff image was then analyzed using a custom MATLAB script (Mathwork, Natick, MA). Elliptical regions of interest (ROIs) were manually drawn around neurons, which were identified by their morphology as bright rings of fluorescence surrounding the soma (Fig 1b,d). Fluorescence intensity time-courses for each neuron were generated by averaging all pixels within a cell's ROI. Baseline fluorescence intensity (F_0) was calculated as the average signal during the 30-second pre-stimulation interval, and each time-course was then converted to a $\Delta F/F_0$ to represent SNR. To identify activated neurons, each neuron's $\Delta F/F_0$ signal during stimulation was compared with their pre-stimulation $\Delta F/F_0$ signal. A fluorescence threshold of the mean pre-stimulation signal + three standard deviations (SD) was then established, such that neurons which showed $\Delta F/F_0$ changes that exceeded the threshold during stimulation were considered to be activated by the electrical stimulation. The spatial locations and the activation properties of these neurons were then quantified for further analysis.

Neuropil Activation

Neuropil intensity was quantified by averaging the intensity level of a 10 x 25 µm region that did not contain neuronal somas. For each frequency, the neuropil was measured in the following distances from the edge of the electrode; 10-20, 30-40, 50-60, 100-110, 150-160, and 245-255 µm. Similarly, representative neuronal somas were selected at 15 and 115 µm from the electrode. F/F_0 of GCaMP intensities were computed where F_0 was the average GCaMP intensity of the 30 s pre-stimulus period.

Temporal activation pattern

Somas were classified as onset-responsive if they were activated during the first 0-2 seconds of the 30 second pulse train but ceased activation before the final 2 seconds of the pulse train (28-30 s). Somas were classified as steady-state-responsive neurons if they were active during 28-30 s post-stimulation onset. Duration of activity was calculated for each neuron by considering all time-points during stimulation which exceeded the intensity threshold. To examine the temporal characteristics of activated neurons in local vs distant or dense vs sparse groups, a weighted response time was estimated for each neuron. The 'Activation Time' (τ) was calculated as the time at which the cumulative intensity reached 50% of the maximum cumulative ΔF/F signal change during the stimulation period (t between 0 to 30 s);

$$\int_{t=0}^{\tau} \frac{\Delta F(t)}{F} dt = 50\% * \int_{t=0}^{30} \frac{\Delta F(t)}{F} dt$$

where dt represents the frame period. This expression describes the time it takes to cover half of the response energy.

Spatial activation pattern

The spatial relationship between stimulation frequency and activation pattern was determined by measuring the distance from the center of each active neuron to the nearest edge of the stimulating electrode site. The location of the center of the stimulating electrode site was visually identified from the same image series that was used to identify activated neurons, and was confirmed with a high-resolution image taken immediately before the trial. The distances from the nearest edge of the stimulating electrode site to each neuron that was activated during the 30 s stimulation period were estimated for all animals and stimulation frequencies. The mean distance + 1SD was then calculated for each stimulation frequency and animal. Because the distance of onset and steady state activated neurons were considered for these calculations, distance thresholds remained fairly consistent across stimulation frequencies within animals. Therefore, the stimulation frequency with the minimum mean + 1SD for each animal was chosen to represent a distance threshold (139.7±18.8 µm for n=5), whereby fully encompassed cells were considered local neurons, while those beyond the distance threshold were considered distant neurons.

Activation density

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Density was examined as an independent measure by creating concentric circular bins, with an increasing radius of 20 µm drawn around the center of the electrode site. The number of fully encompassed, activated neurons within the area defined by each bin were counted from 0 to 30 s post stimulation onset, and then divided by the total area encompassed by that bin. Activated neurons were separated into dense or sparse populations, by establishing a threshold of mean density + 1 SD. To compare high and low-density activation patterns across stimulation frequencies, density thresholds were established for all stimulation frequencies, and the lowest mean density threshold was applied to all trials.

Statistical analysis

A one-way ANOVA, followed by post-hoc analysis with a Bonferroni correction was performed to assess significance between stimulation frequencies. Comparisons between groups (i.e. local vs distant, onset vs steady-state) were tested using a two-sample unequal variance T-test. All data in figures and text are reported as mean ± standard error.

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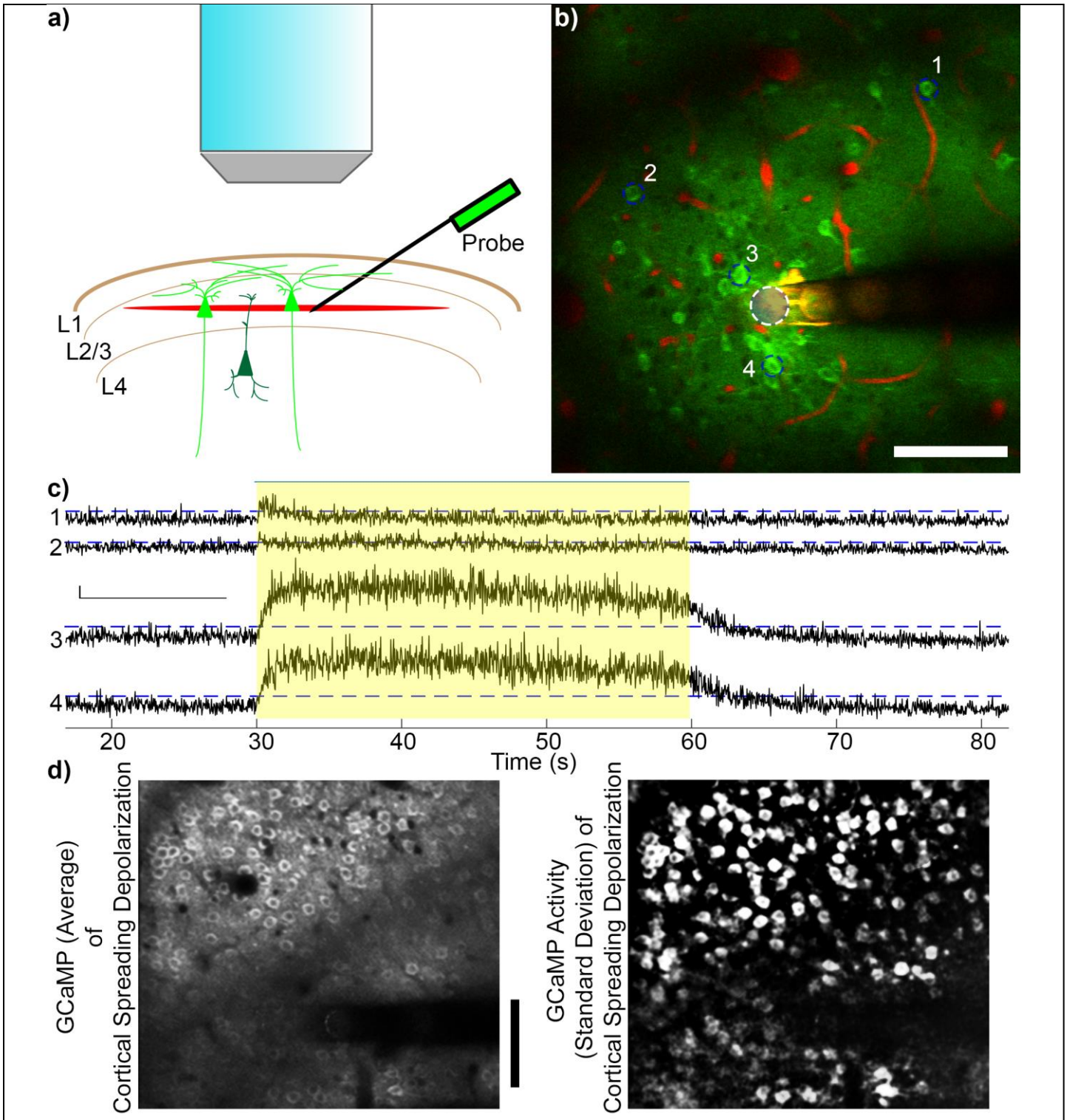

Figure 1: Experimental setup for imaging continuous stimulation evoked calcium activity. a) Microelectrodes were implanted into Layer II/III of S1 Cortex. Red region indicates the imaging plane. b) 1 s average of GCaMP6 activation around the implanted microelectrode during 90 Hz stimulation at 15 mW and 125 µm from the surface of the brain. White dashed circle indicates the activated electrode site. GCaMP intensity of numbered cells indicated by dashed blue circles are shown in (c). Yellow indicates duration of stimulation (30 s). Scale indicates detected F/F_0= 100% and 10 s. Blue dashed line indicates activity detection threshold (3*StD of F_0 over the 30s pre-stimulus period) D) Average (left) and standard deviation (right) of GCaMP activity during a cortical spreading depression shows dense labeling of neurons. Scale bar = 100 µm.

Results

In vivo two-photon calcium imaging of ketamine/xylazine-anesthetized GCaMP6 transgenic mice was used to study the spatiotemporal activation pattern of neurons during microstimulation. Neurons in layer II/III of S1 somatosensory cortex were imaged as previously described[39], and electrically stimulated continuously for 30 s

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at different frequencies (Fig 1a). GCaMPs are genetically encoded intracellular calcium indicators that largely reflect action potential firing[46-51]. Because quiescent neurons have low GCaMP fluorescence, capillary visualization using 0.1 mg of sulforhodamin101 (SR101) was used to ensure the location of the electrode and visibility in the tissue with low laser power (< 20 mW), as previously described (Fig 1b)[39-44,52]. Although GCaMP6 is more sensitive compared to other calcium indicators, such as Oregon green BAPTA, it has a longer decay constant that did not impair detection of activity[51]. Evoked fluorescence traces show considerable variability in the intracellular calcium response to continuous stimulation (Fig 1c). Due to the binding constant, saturation of the GCaMP6, and temporal imaging resolution, it is not possible to quantify the frequency of calcium transients. The mouse line used in this study (GP4.3Dkim/J) has relatively high expression levels of GCaMP in layer II/III neurons[46], which was corroborated in a separate study, where this mouse line was imaged during a cortical spreading depression (Fig. 1d). The results demonstrate that sparse GCaMP activation noted during electrical stimulation is not due to sparse GCaMP expression in the genetic line.

The laminar probes were inserted with the electrode sites facing up and the imaging plane positioned approximately 10-15 µm above the electrode site in order to capture the neurons just above the stimulation site. The position of the imaging plane was confirmed through anatomical Z-stacks taken prior to the experiment. Co-registration of vasculature features, outline of the implanted probe, and the electrode sites and traces were used to ensure that the imaging plane was just above the electrode site throughout the experiment. Electrical stimulation parameters matched previously employed protocols for neuroprosthetics and neuromodulation applications[53-57]. Stimulation pulses were cathodic leading biphasic symmetric waveforms with pulse widths of 50 µs/phase[58]. Stimulation was performed for 30 s at a charge density and charge per phase below the Shannon safety limit for planar iridium electrode sites with 703 μm^2 surface area[45] (< 3nC/phase)[59,60]. In general, stimulation was delivered at 50 µA and 50 µs, which has been previously been shown to be just above the sensitivity threshold[56]. The stimulation frequency was varied over different trials (Fig. 2-3; 10, 30, 50, 75, 90, 130, 250 Hz). As expected from previous reports[38], electrical stimulation led to sparse, distributed activation patterns (Fig. 2). Frequencies of 50 Hz and 130 Hz were selected as they are the frequencies at which the Shannon/McCreery safety curve was developed and the average optimal therapeutic frequency for deep brain stimulation (DBS) in Parkinson's Disease patients, respectively[45,60].

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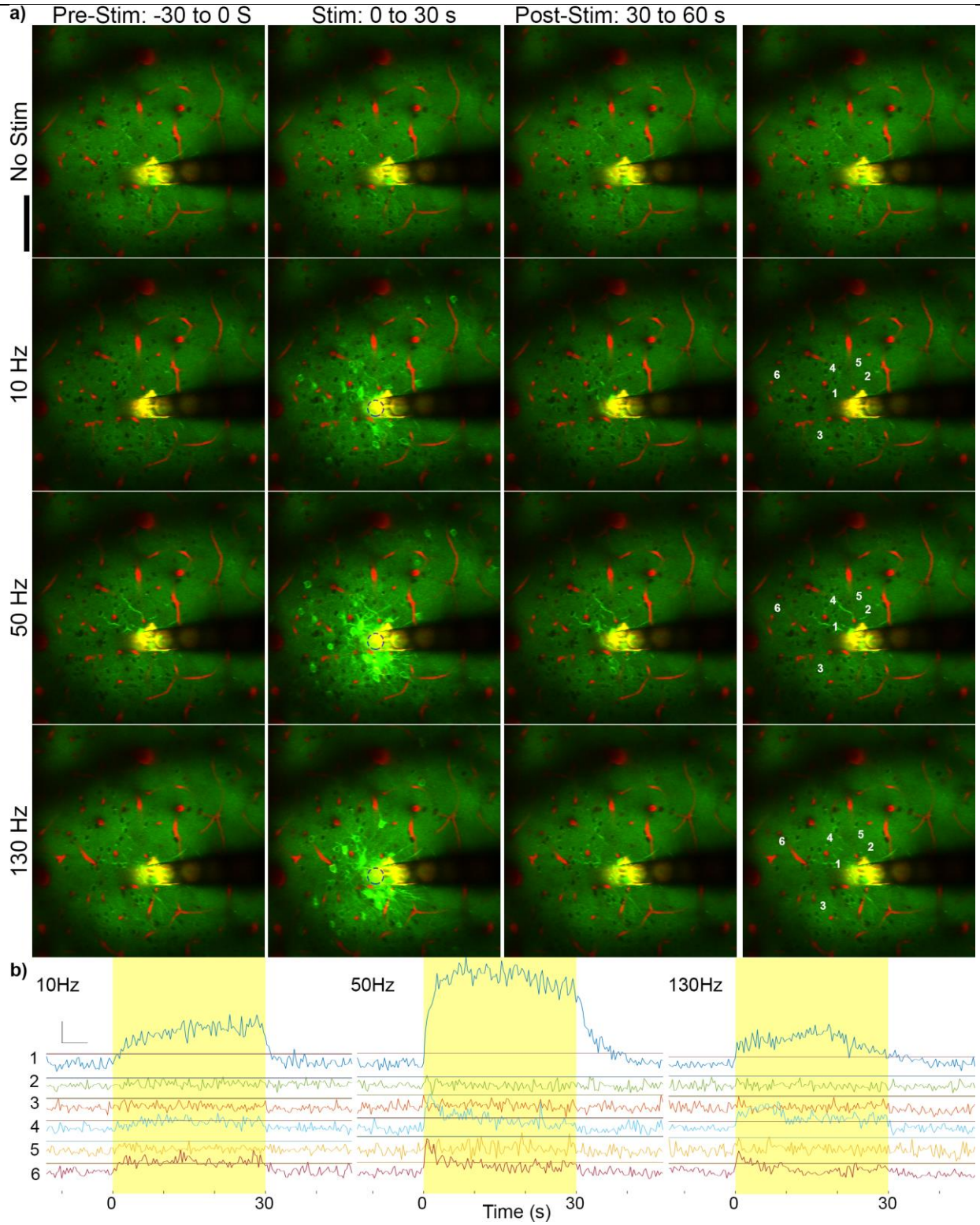

Figure 2: Stimulation frequency influences GCaMP activation pattern. a) Mean GCaMP imaging of 30 s prior to stimulation (left), during stimulation (middle), and post-stimulation (right) at no stimulation, 10 Hz, 50 Hz, and 130 Hz. Green indicates GCaMP labelled neurons and red indicates vasculature. The electrode sites and traces reflect fluorescence in both channels and therefore appear in yellow. Different patterns of activation can be observed at different frequencies, and GCaMP activity returns to baseline by 30 s post-stimulus. Scale = 100 µm. *k*=-0.12. b) GCaMP activity of labeled cells with increasing distances from the electrode (by distance from the electrode edge: 1 = 15 µm; 2 = 33 µm; 3 = 51 µm; 4 = 54 µm; 5 = 64 µm; and 6 = 105 µm). Horizontal lines indicate threshold. Neurons 1, 4, and 6 show electrical stimulation induced GCaMP activity above threshold while 2, 3, and 5 do not.

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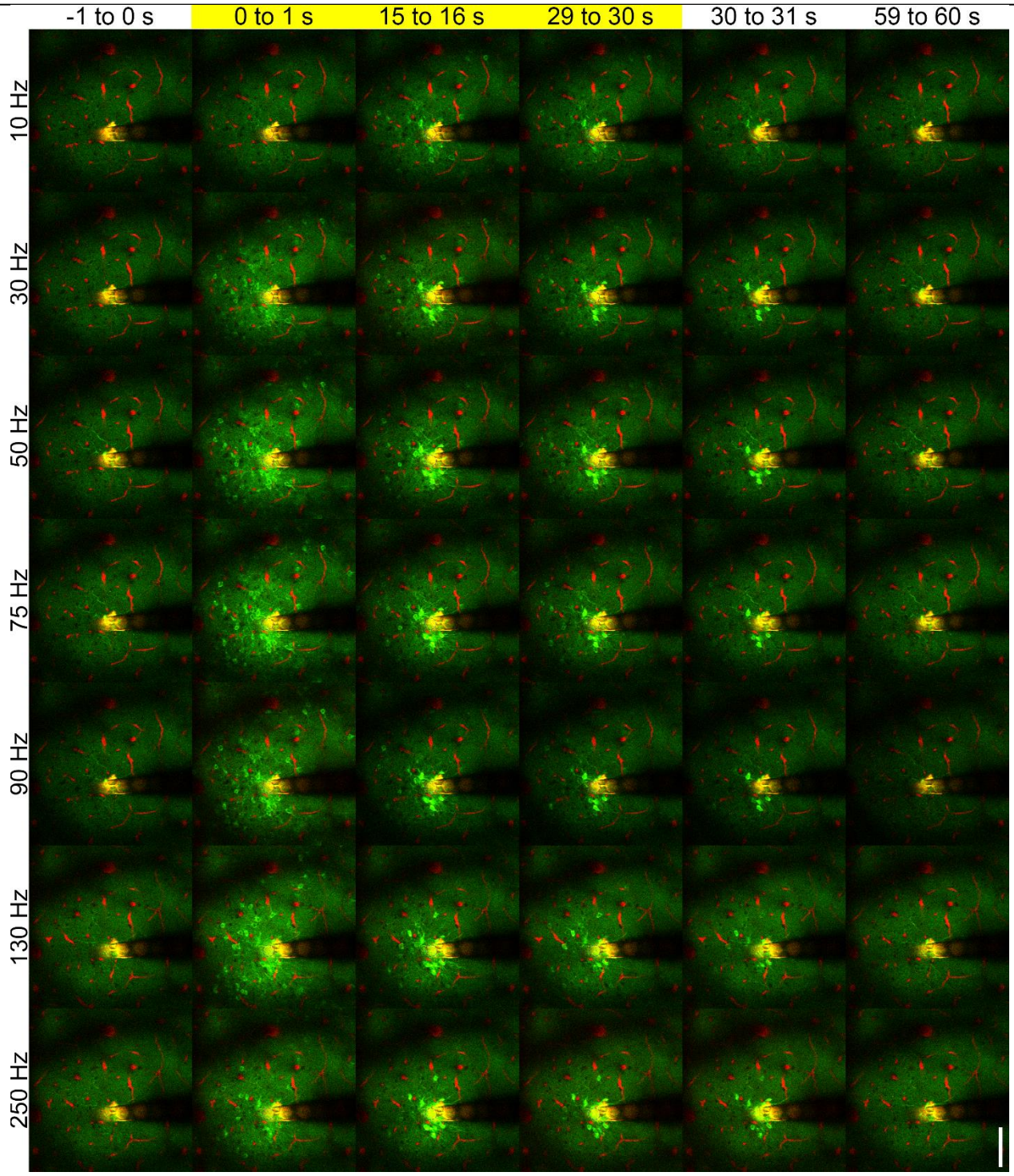

Figure 3: Continuous electrical stimulation evokes frequency dependent temporal activation. Mean GCaMP activity immediately before stimulation (-1 to 0s), at stimulation onset (0 to 1s), during stimulation (15 to 16s), immediately before stimulation termination (29 to 30s), immediately after termination (30 to 31s) and after stimulation (59 to 60 s). While the activation of GCaMP is lower at 10 Hz, GCaMP activation pattern is similar at onset across frequencies. However, the activation pattern at the end of the stimulation train (29 to 30 s) differs based on frequency of the stimulation. Images taken from the same animal and trials as figure 2. Scale = 100 µm. k=-0.12.

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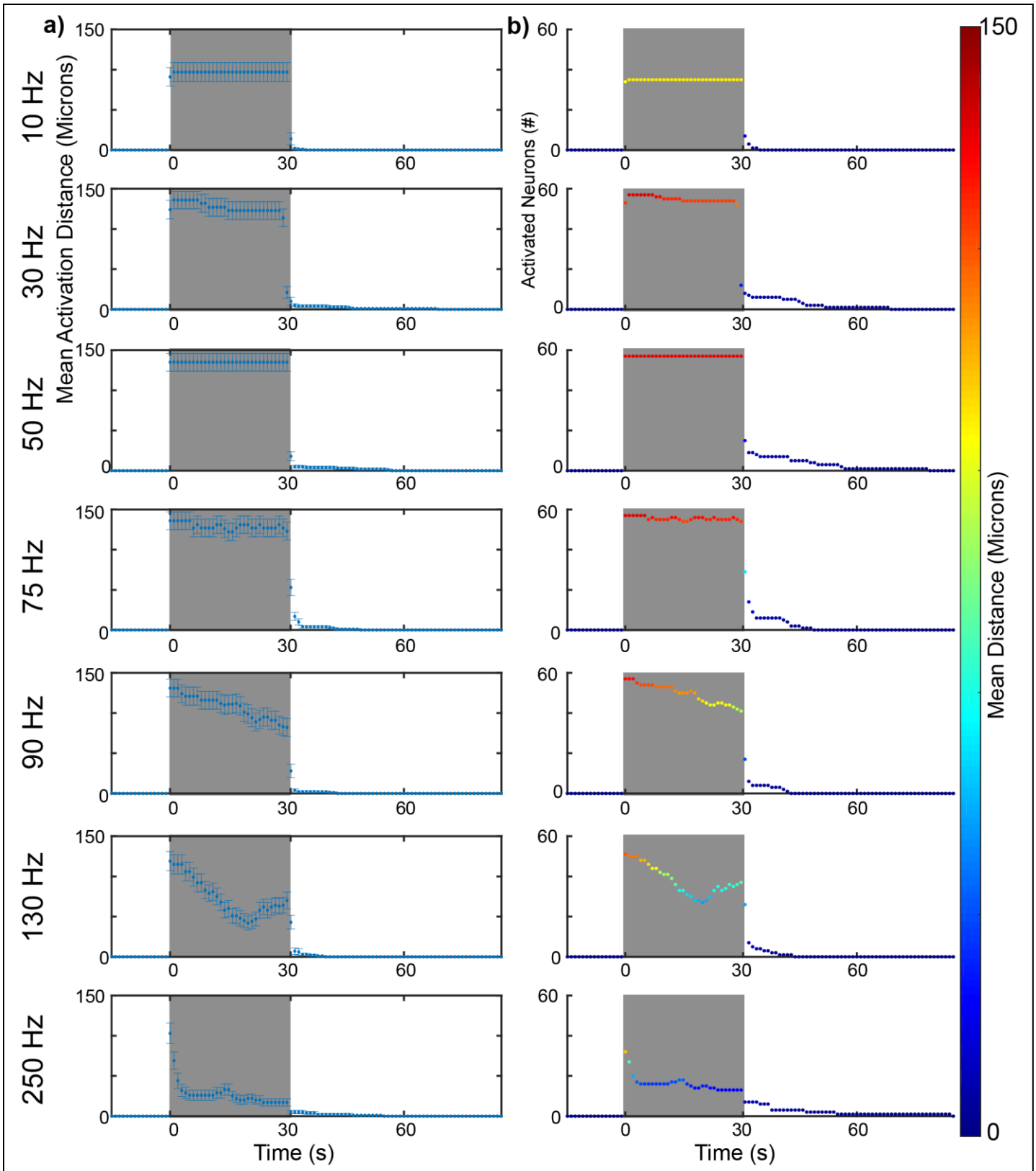

Figure 4: Spatial and temporal distribution of frequency dependent GCaMP activation in a representative animal. a) The average distance of all active neurons during electrical stimulation (grey box) decreases over time at higher frequencies. Error bars indicate standard error. **b)** The number of active neurons during electrical stimulation also decreases over time at higher frequencies. The mean activation distance (color; same as (a)) shows that electrical stimulation at higher frequencies (>90 Hz) leads to a decrease in the average distance of calcium activity over long stimulation pulse trains (color) and decrease in variance (a), suggesting the decrease in average distance is due to discontinued activity of distant neurons.

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Continuous stimulation elicits two populations of neural activation with distinct spatiotemporal responses

Changes in intensity of neuronal activation over the course of the 30 s pulse train were evident, with dramatically different temporal responses between local and distant neurons. In general during onset, a pulse train activated both local and distant neurons (Fig. 3, 4a). However, for frequencies > 10 Hz, as the pulse train continued, distant neurons would cease to be activated, resulting in a marked difference in distal neural activation at the end of a pulse train. This effect became more pronounced as frequency was increased. As can be seen in Figure 4b, at lower frequencies (10-75 Hz), the number of neurons activated across time during the pulse train is relatively constant, where neurons were considered activated if their calcium transient was greater than three standard deviations from the pre-stimulus period. Because these were anesthetized animals, minimal spontaneous calcium transients occurred during the no-stimulus condition (Fig. 2). At frequencies of 90 Hz or greater, there is a clear decrease in the number of neurons activated as the pulse train progresses; the duration of activation for distant neurons became shorter as frequency increased from 90 to 130 Hz, with a sharper drop in the number of active neurons at 250 Hz. At 250 Hz, distant neurons remained active for approximately 5 seconds (Figure 4ab). Representative calcium activity for neurons 15 μm and 115 μm from the electrode are shown in Figure 5a.

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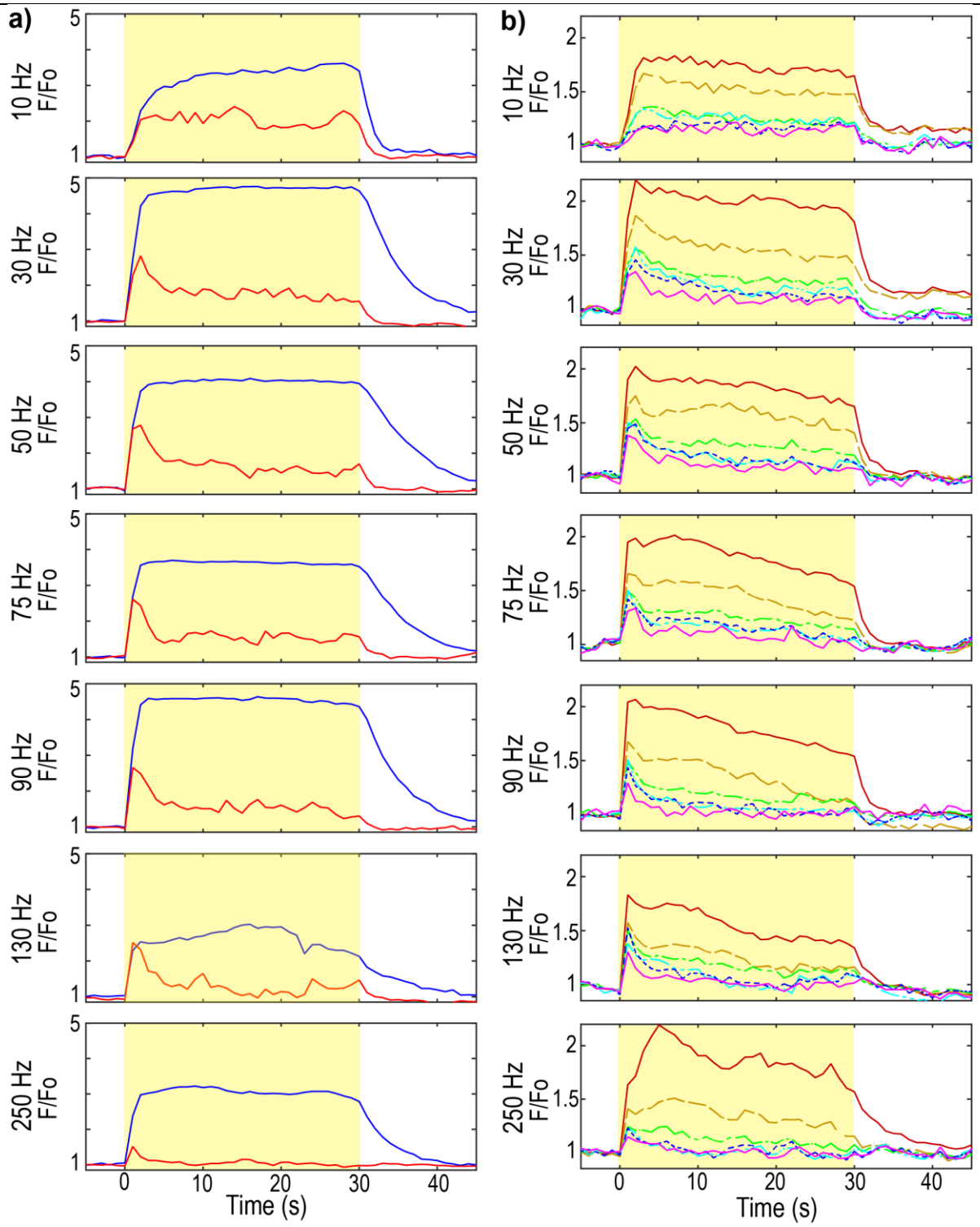

Figure 5: Neuronal soma activation and neuropil activation show frequency dependent temporal falloff. a) GCaMP activation in the soma at 15 µm (blue) or 115 µm (red) from the electrode site. Yellow indicates the stimulation. F_0 is the mean intensity of the pre-stimulus period. Calcium activity was averaged into 1 s bins to facilitate visualization. **b)** GCaMP neuropil activation at 10-20 µm (red, solid line), 30-40 µm (orange, dashed line), 50-60 µm (green, -·-), 100-110 µm (cyan, -···-), 150-160 µm (blue, dotted line), and 245-255 µm (violet, solid line) from the electrode site. Spatial and temporal neuropil falloff increase with frequency.

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Distinct GCaMP intensity falloff between neuronal somas and neuropil during stimulation

Neuropil activation as a function of distance from the electrode, time post-stimulation onset, and frequency of stimulation was also examined (Fig. 5). Since the neuropil is composed of neurites from surrounding GCaMP-expressing cells, it is understood to represent a spatial average of nearby responding and non-responding cells[38]. In this analysis, regions of interest previously identified as isolated somas were removed, and the average changes in GCaMP intensity in the remaining volume were assessed. Across all frequencies tested, there is a more linear fall off in stimulation evoked GCaMP intensity as a function of distance from the electrode as opposed to the fall off observed for the number of activated somas. In contrast to the neuropil, example neurons near (15 µm) the electrode site show gradual increase in GCaMP intensity at 10 Hz and a rapid plateau between 30 to 90 Hz (Fig. 5b, blue; 15 µm). However, similar to the time course of distant soma activation (Fig. 5b, red; 115 µm), there is a peak in activation of the neuropil in the first five seconds post stimulation, with a decrease in activation thereafter. At 10 Hz the decrease in neuropil activation is slower across all distances, with the peak and subsequent decay being steeper (slope of F/F_0) for higher frequencies. There is also a post-stimulus residual activation for both the neuropil and local neurons (Fig. 5a b). This residual increase in activation can last up to 30 seconds or more post stimulation (Fig. 4b) for somas, but is typically shorter in duration for the neuropil (Fig. 5a).

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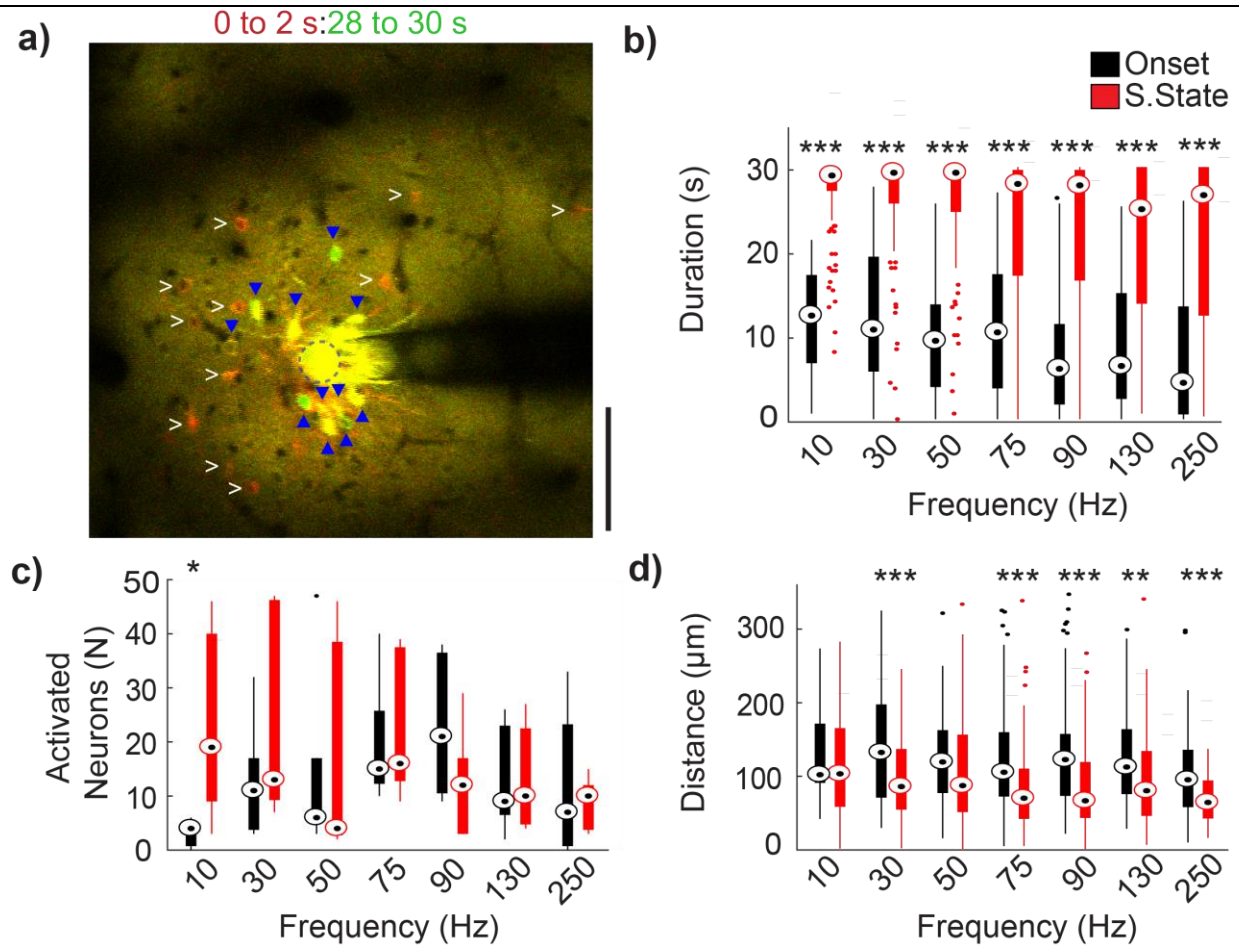

Figure 6: Onset and steady-state neurons are spatially distinct at high stimulation frequencies. (a) Mean GCaMP activity at the onset of the stimulation (0 to 2 s; red) and immediately before the end of stimulation (28 to 30 s; green) (stimulation parameter: 250 Hz, 50µA). Onset neurons (white arrowheads) and steady-state: (blue triangle) are marked in both images. It should be noted that, several steady-state neurons were active even at the onset of stimulation (yellow). (b) Average duration of onset and steady-state phase. Duration of activation phases were calculated by tracking onset-responsive (neurons that are active 0-2s into stimulation) and steady-state-responsive neurons (neurons active 28-30s into stimulation). (c) Average number of neurons activated during onset and steady-state phase for 10Hz, 30Hz, 50Hz, 75Hz, 90Hz, 130Hz and 250 Hz stimulation. (d) Average distance of the neurons activated during onset and steady-state phase. With increasing frequency, onset activated neurons are located significantly further from the electrode site than steady-state neurons. Two sample t-test, *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01 and ***P < 0.001. Circles within boxplots denote the sample median, the lower and upper edges of the boxes are the 25th and 75th percentiles respectively, and the whiskers extend to approximately ±2.7σ. Outliers are shown as dots. (n = 5).

Stimulation in somatosensory cortex activates neurons with different temporal activation behavior

Previous work evaluating the effects of microstimulation on neuronal activation utilized brief stimulation paradigms with pulse train durations on the order of milliseconds. However, during continuous stimulation, different temporal activation patterns were observed during the stimulation period in individual mice (Figs 3 & 4). Therefore, the aggregate temporal properties of neuronal activation across all mice (n=5) was examined. Temporal activation was separated into 1) onset neurons that rapidly decline in activity during stimulation and 2) steady-state neurons that remain activated throughout the stimulation period. Somas were classified as onset-responsive if they were activated during the first 0-2 s of the 30 s pulse train but ceased activation before the final 2 s of the pulse train (28-30 s); or as steady-state-responsive neurons if they were active during the final 2 s of stimulation (28-30 s post-stimulation onset) (Fig. 6a). In this acute experiment, all steady-state neurons were also active in the first 2 s of the pulse train. The duration of onset and steady-state neuron activity was measured by quantifying the total time during the stimulation period that GCaMP intensity was greater than an intensity threshold of three standard deviations from the pre-stimulus period. Steady-state neurons had a significantly greater duration of activity than onset neurons (10 Hz: 27.5±0.4 s, 30 Hz: 26.8±0.5 s, 50 Hz: 26.0±0.7 s, 75 Hz:

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23.5±0.8 s, 90 Hz: 22.6±1.3 s, 130 Hz: 21.6±1.2 s, 250 Hz: 22.5±1.6 s; compared to the duration of onset activated neurons at 10 Hz: 12.3±1.6 s, 30 Hz: 13.3±1.1 s, 50 Hz: 9.7±0.7 s, 75 Hz: 11.4±0.8 s, 90 Hz: 8.0±0.6 s, 130 Hz: 9.2±0.9 s, 250 Hz: 7.8±1.0 s) (Fig. 6b, $p < 0.001$, two sample t-test). There were significantly less onset neurons for 10 Hz stimulation compared to steady-state neurons, indicating most of the activated somas at 10 Hz were steady-state neurons (Fig. 6c, $p<0.05$).

In order to evaluate if there was a spatial relationship for onset and steady-state somas, the spatial distribution of the two populations were compared (Fig. 6a). Since charge density accumulates on the edges of planar electrode sites,[61] distances were measured from the center of each soma to the nearest edge of the stimulating electrode site. Steady-state neurons were generally located closer to the electrode site than onset neurons, on average by ~40 µm (Fig. 6d, 30 Hz: 98.4±5.0 vs. 136.9±9.3 µm, respectively, 75 Hz: 83.9±5.3 vs. 122.4±7.2 µm, 90 Hz: 85.1±7.9 vs 129.3±6.6 µm, 130 Hz: 93.1±8.0 vs. 123.6±8.1 µm, 250 Hz: 68.4±5.5 vs 103.6±7.7 µm). Onset neurons and steady-state neurons showed distinct spatial relationships that were distal or proximal to the stimulation electrode, respectively.

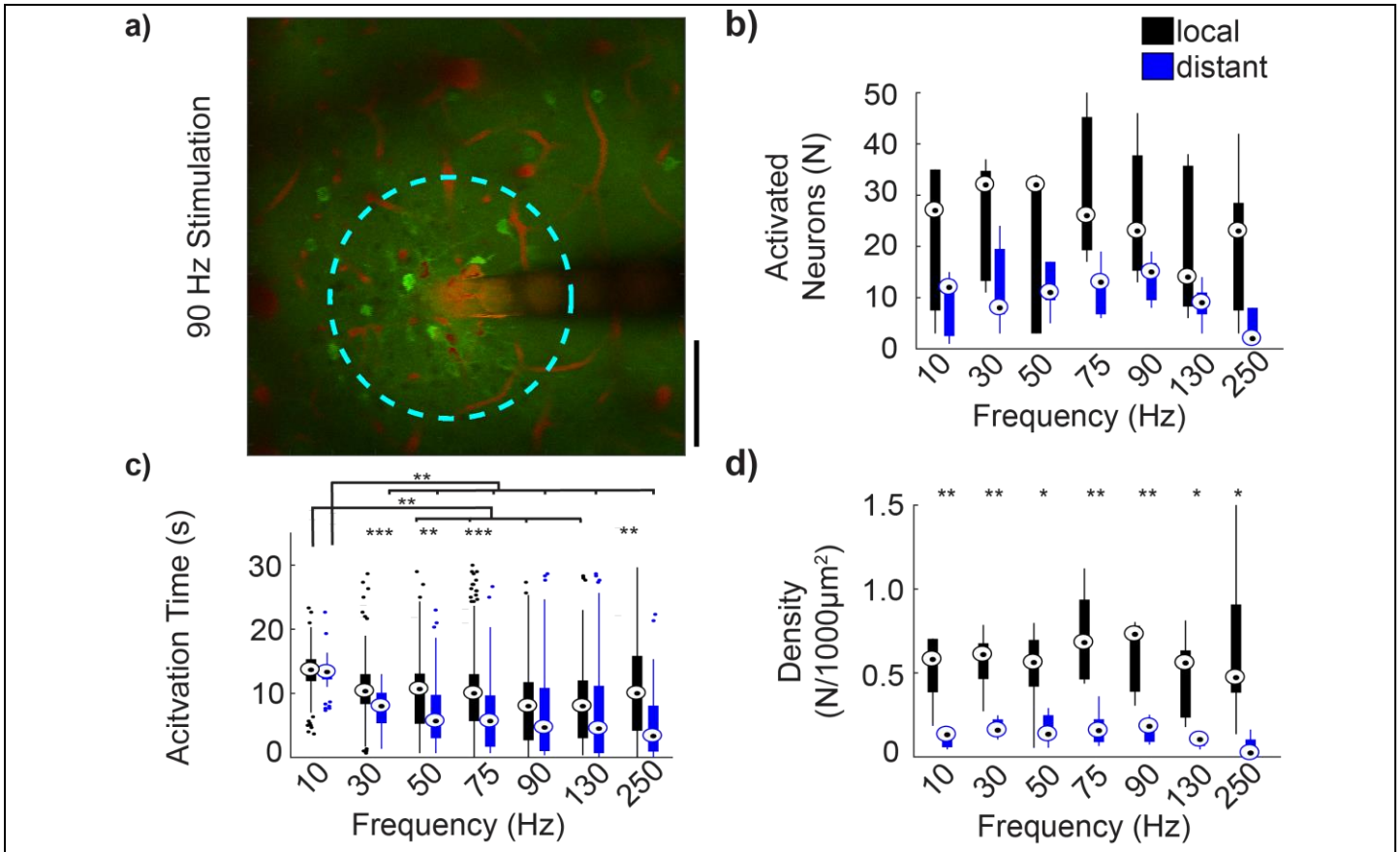

Figure 7: Activation properties of local and distant neuronal populations. (a) Standard deviation intensity projection over 30 seconds following 90Hz stimulation. Distance threshold shown by cyan circle. (b) Average number of neurons activated that are local and distal from the electrode. (c) Average activation time for local and distant activated neuron populations. (d) Average activation density of local and distal neuron population. Activation density for locally activated neurons was significantly higher for all stimulation frequencies than distally activated neurons. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01 and ***P < 0.001, two sample t-test and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni post hoc analysis. (n = 5).

Stimulation in somatosensory cortex activates local and distant neurons in a frequency dependent manner

During continuous electrical stimulation GCaMP activity in distant somas decreased at higher frequencies (Fig. 6d). While stimulation at frequencies greater than 10 Hz led to onset and steady-state neurons exhibiting a significant spatial relationship, not all onset neurons were distant neurons, and not all distant neurons were steady-state neurons. Therefore, in order to minimize methodological bias, somas were also grouped by distance to evaluate if 'local' and 'distant' neurons exhibited distinct temporal relationships. The aggregated temporal

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activation patterns over local and distant neuronal populations in all mice (n=5) were considered. Somas were spatially classified by establishing a distance threshold (see methods, Fig. 7a,b), whereby cell bodies located within the threshold were considered 'local' neurons, while cells located outside the threshold were considered 'distant' neurons.

Somatic calcium changes generally reflect action potential firing; although during periods of high spike rates, GCaMP6 fluorescence intensity can saturate due to the long decay constant[51]. Because distant somas may exhibit a stimulation evoked burst of activity, which can be followed by a period of lower activity throughout the rest of the stimulation period (Fig. 5b; red), stimulation duration did not effectively capture the bursting dynamics of these neurons. Therefore, to evaluate if local and distant somas had different temporal activation patterns, the 'Activation Time' of the two populations were compared. The Activation Time was defined as an estimate of the mean time at which the cell is responsive, weighted by the GCaMP intensity, and was calculated as the time-point at which the cumulative intensity reached 50% of the maximum cumulative $\Delta F/F_0$ signal change during the stimulation period. For example, a soma that reaches peak intensity at 0 seconds into the pulse train and maintains the exact same ΔF/F for all 30 s would have an 'Activation Time' of 15 s. Similarly, a soma that maintains a peak ΔF/F from 0 s to 5 s, but then falls to 20% of peak ΔF/F from 5 s to 30 s would have an 'Activation Time' of 5 s. Activation Time was significantly greater in local somas than in distant somas for 30 Hz (10.9±0.4 vs 7.6±0.4 s), 50 Hz (9.8±0.6 vs 6.9±0.7 s), 75 Hz (10.5±0.6 vs 6.4±0.7 s), and 250 Hz (11.4±0.9 vs 5.7±1.5 s) stimulation (Fig. 7c, $p<0.05$). Additionally, Activation Time of both local and distant somas showed significant frequency dependence (Fig. 7c, $F=7.86$, $p<0.05$ for local neurons and $F=6.3$, $p<0.01$ for distal neurons). Particularly of note was that for 10Hz stimulation, the local somas had significantly greater Activation Time than higher stimulation frequencies ($p<0.01$).

As a spatial pattern of activation was observed during continuous stimulation (Fig 7c), the activation density for local and distant populations was measured. Activation density for local somas was calculated as the number of somas activated within the distance threshold, divided by the total area encompassed by the threshold. For distant somas, activation density was calculated using the area encompassed by an annulus with inner radius, *r*, equal to the distance threshold, and outer radius, *R*, equal to the distance of the furthest soma. For all stimulation frequencies, local neurons had significantly greater neuronal density than distant somas (Fig. 7d, $p<0.05$; 10 Hz 0.525±0.097 vs 0.116±0.027 N/1000μm^2; 30 Hz 0.567±0.085 vs 0.174±0.026 N/1000μm^2; 50 Hz 0.523±0.126 vs 0.168±0.042 N/1000μm^2; 75 Hz 0.717±0.129 vs 0.171±0.52 N/1000μm^2; 90 Hz 0.605±0.102 vs 0.161±0.033 N/1000μm^2; 130 Hz 0.475±0.116 vs 0.997±0.019 N/1000μm^2; 250 Hz 0.667±0.244 vs0.0593±0.029 N/1000μm^2, respectively).

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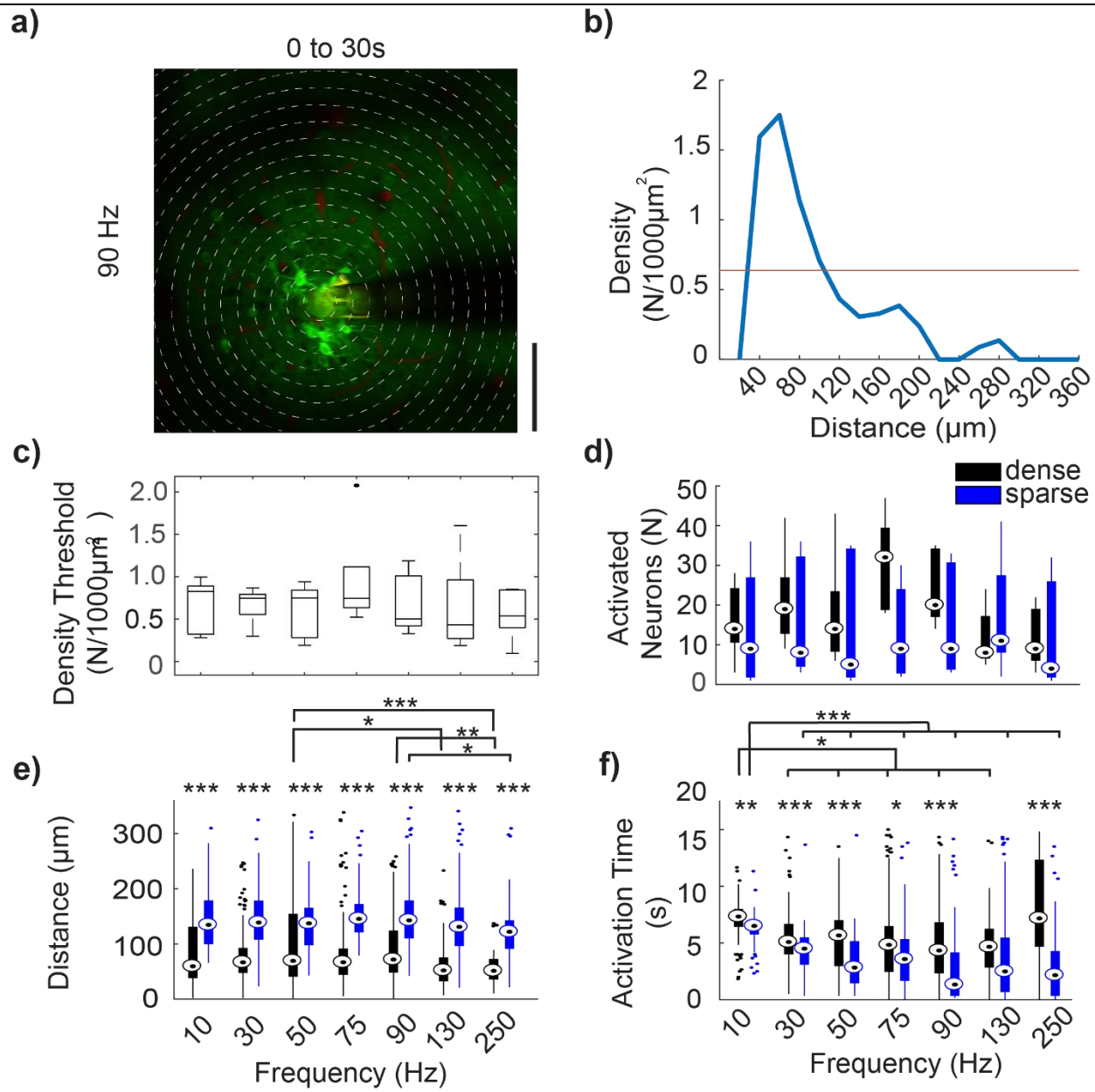

Figure 8: Activation properties of dense and sparse populations of neurons. (a) Mean GCaMP activity (30 s, 90 Hz stimulation) with concentric bins of 20 μm incremental radius around the center of the electrode site, demonstrating density calculation method. (b) For the same trial, density (N/1000 μm^2) is plotted against distance of the bins from the electrode. (c) Average density threshold of 10Hz, 30Hz, 50Hz, 75Hz, 90Hz, 130Hz and 250 Hz stimulation. Density threshold was calculated from mean density + 1SD for the entire 30s stimulation. Threshold density value separates dense and sparse activated neurons. (d) Number of activated neurons in dense and sparse populations. (e) Average distance of dense and sparse activated neurons. For all stimulation frequencies, sparsely activated neurons are located further from the electrode site than dense activated neurons. (f) Average activation time of dense and sparse activated neuron population. Dense activated neurons are active for a longer duration in all stimulation frequency except 130Hz. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01 and ***P < 0.001, two sample t-test. (n = 5).

Stimulation in somatosensory cortex creates a frequency dependent activation density pattern

In original studies by Stoney et al, they noted activation of densely packed somas local to the electrode. In contrast, Histed et al noted only sparse activation of distant somas. To investigate this discrepancy, we evaluated the density of somas activated as a function of distance from the electrode. Prolonged electrical stimulation led to a dense activation pattern characterized by a decrease in activity in distant somas at frequencies >10 Hz. Similarly as before, somas were separated into dense and sparse populations using a density threshold and

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evaluated for distinct spatial and temporal relationships. In order to evaluate if continuous electrical stimulation can activate a set of cells restricted to a small spatial area, patterns of somatic activation were classified as dense or sparse. Concentric circular bins were drawn with their origin at the center of the electrode site with subsequent bins increasing in 20 µm radial increments (Fig. 8a). Density was calculated as the number of activated neurons in each bin, divided by the concentric bin area (Fig 8b). Density thresholds were established similarly to distance thresholds (10 Hz 0.657±0.146 N/1000µm^2; 30 Hz 0.663±0.098 N/1000µm^2; 50 Hz 0.599±0.147 N/1000µm^2; 75 Hz 0.963±0.282 N/1000µm^2; 90 Hz 0.682±0.164 N/1000µm^2; 130 Hz 0.653±0.255 N/1000µm^2; 250 Hz 0.563±0.139 N/1000µm^2 (Fig. 8c-d).

Activated somas within dense populations were located significantly closer to the electrode site for all stimulation frequencies (Fig. 8e, $p<0.001$; 10 Hz 86.4±6.9 vs 143.6±6.6 µm; 30 Hz 83.2±5.5 vs 145.7±6.1 µm; 50 Hz 98.7±8.0 vs 138.9±6.0 µm; 75 Hz 80.2±5.1 vs 155.6±6.0 µm; 90 Hz 90.3±5.6 vs 156.0±7.8 µm; 130 Hz 60.7±6.2 vs 143.3±7.2 µm; 250 Hz 55.4±3.9 vs 124.5±7.1 µm, respectively). The distance of densely activated somas was largest during 50 Hz stimulation (Fig. 8e, $F=4.5$, $p<0.05$ for 50 vs 130 Hz and $p<0.001$ for 50 vs 250 Hz). Additionally, densely activated somas demonstrated significantly greater Activation Times compared to sparsely activated somas (Fig. 8f, $p < 0.05$ for 10 Hz (14.0±0.3 vs 12.4±0.4 s, respectively), 30 Hz (10.8±0.4 vs 8.5±0.5 s), 50 Hz (10.6±0.5 vs 6.6±0.6 s), 75 Hz (10.2±0.7 vs 7.7±0.6 s), 90 Hz (9.9±0.8 vs 5.6±0.7 s), and 250 Hz (15.0±0.9 vs 6.2±1.1 s)). The Activation Time of dense and sparse somas showed similar frequency dependence as observed in local and distal somas in Fig. 7c ($F=8.34$, $p<0.05$ for dense somas, and $F=10.97$, $p<0.001$ for sparse somas). Stimulation activated somas that were classified as higher density were closer to the electrode and had longer Activation Time compared to low density classified regions, which were further from the electrode and had shorter Activation Times. At the onset of electrical stimulation, there is a low density, sparse, and distributed activation pattern of neurons.

Discussion:

This work shows that in acute experiments continuous electrical stimulation for 30 seconds strongly activated somas located in close proximity to the electrode for the duration of the stimulation period for frequencies >10 Hz (Figures 2-8). Previous work by Histed et al utilizing 2-photon microscopy and a calcium indicator demonstrated that stimulation with <1 s pulse trains of cathodic phase leading, 200 µs/phase, biphasic pulses under 10 µA in current at 250 Hz, resulted in a sparse, distributed population of activated neurons surrounding the electrode tip, without a strong bias towards neurons near the tip[38]. Increasing current over the 4-9 µA range increased the density of neurons activated within this 100-200 µm sphere, again without a bias towards closer to the stimulation site[38]. Through multiple experimental manipulations they concluded that stimulation in this confined parameter space only directly activates axons within 30 µm of the electrode, which in turn antidromically activates the somas associated with these axons, yielding the observed sparse pattern of somatic activation[38]. These results were counter to prevailing theory based on seminal studies by Stoney et al which suggest that stimulation leads to a sphere of activated neurons near the electrode tip, with the size of the sphere growing in proportion to the current applied[34-37,62-64].

The Histed results were obtained using stimulation charges at or just above the threshold for eliciting a significant response using a calcium indicator (0.8 to 1.8 nC/phase), applied for brief periods (<1 s) and at very high frequency (250 Hz), which led to the implication that, “it is impossible to activate a set of cells restricted to a small spatial volume”[38]. In contrast, the results described in our present study were obtained using longer pulse trains (30 s) at comparatively larger stimulation charges (2.5 nC/phase) to better match limits established for sensory perception in behaving experiments[56]. Utilizing these parameters, we observed a distinct pattern of somatic activation across frequencies consisting of a comparatively denser group of somas near the electrode tip and a sparse group of neurons located distant from the electrode. In short, our results support both the original studies by Stoney and the more recent study by Histed, painting a complex picture of spatial activation that is dependent on charge applied and time of observation during an extended pulse train[34,38].

Our results also show that, in general, these two classes of activated somas (local and distant) have differing responses over the course of a 30 s pulse train that also varies based on stimulation frequency (Fig. 4b). In general, activated somas both local and distant remained activated at lower stimulation frequencies throughout the duration of the pulse train. At higher frequencies 90 Hz and above, distant somas activated at the beginning of the 30 s pulse train ceased to remain active by the end of the pulse train, with the Activation Time progressively

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shorter as the frequency was increased. The temporal response based on frequency may in part explain the contradicting results between Histed and other historic studies. If measurements were only taken near the end of an extended pulse train, especially at high frequencies, only the dense activation of local soma would be observed[38]. Consistent with Histed's observation that the activation of distant soma were attributable to local activation of connected axons near the electrode, the temporal response of the neuropil near the electrode after somas were subtracted across frequencies paralleled the frequency dependent temporal responses of distant somas, suggesting that the somatic response is caused by changes in activation of the associated axons over the course of the pulse train[38].

The frequency dependent inactivation of axons local to the electrode over the course of an extended pulse train may provide insight on a potential mechanism of action for electrical stimulation for specific therapeutic uses[65,66]. For example, as DBS of the subthalamic nucleus (STN) to treat the tremor associated with Parkinson's Disease was originally based on the positive results of lesioning the same area, STN DBS was originally thought to generate the equivalent of a titratable/reversible lesion of STN. Following studies utilizing microwires for electrophysiological recordings - which are biased towards sampling action potentials initiated at the axon hillock as this is where the largest current deflection occurs – suggested that therapeutic DBS parameters in the 130 Hz range differentially suppress the activity of local STN somas while still activating local axons projecting to the targets from STN nuclei[67]. This led to the suggestion that DBS may be creating an information lesion of physiological signal passing through STN, as entrainment at 130 Hz would prevent physiological signal with temporal information content from being passed due to the stimulus rate and the absolute and relative refractory period of a neuron[68,69]. More recently antidromic activation of tracks of passage traveling near STN from motor cortex, known as the hyperdirect pathway, have received increasing attention as a potential mechanism to ameliorate pathological thalamocortical oscillations driving tremor in Parkinson's Disease[70-72]. The results in the present study demonstrate that stimulation at high frequencies associated with therapeutic DBS initially activates both local soma and local axons connected to distant somas, but over time the evoked activity in local axons projecting to distant somas decreases. These data suggest that to understand the post-synaptic response to stimulation - and ultimately the therapeutic mechanisms of action - one must account for differential activation of axons vs somas near the electrode, as well as changes in the local differential activation profile as a function frequency and time.

The idea that different elements of the neuron may be activated or inactivated at different applied currents is not new[73,74]. It is often assumed, however, this differential evoked response local to the electrode is primarily a function of charge applied (current*pulsewidth) at frequencies at which pulse to pulse entrainment is feasible (130 Hz or less), given stimulation is within the Shannon/McCreery safety limits[45,60]. In this paradigm, changes in evoked network response as a function of frequency and time over the duration of pulse train are presumed to be post-synaptically mediated, for example as a function of vesicular depletion at the synapse leading to synaptic depression[75]. The data in the present study demonstrate that the responses of local axons versus somas differentially change over the course of an extended pulse train, and that frequencies over 50 Hz lead to initial activation but eventually the evoked activity of local axons over the course of the pulse train decreases. This may be very important for understanding the therapeutic mechanisms of action of electrical stimulation, especially in combination with drug administration acting on post-synaptic receptors, as well as lead to new stimulation paradigms leveraging knowledge of the response over time to preferentially stimulate local somas vs axons.

The mechanism by which increasing frequency may cause transient activation of axons local to the electrode followed by inactivation over the pulse train is presently not understood. Continuous stimulation could cause intermittent failure to propagate action potential through the axon at frequencies as low as 30 Hz, putatively mediated by extracellular accumulation of K^+ ions, depletion of ATP, and reduced inward Na^+ current[76]. Alternatively, Ranck et al have demonstrated that increasing intensities of cathodic stimulation may generate a distant virtual anode sufficient to hyperpolarize a stimulated fiber to the extent that any action potential initiated near the cathode is blocked from propagating by the virtual anode[35]. It is unclear whether higher frequencies could generate a similar effect due to a slower time constant for discharging the physiological capacitor at a biofouled electrode/electrolyte interface or at the lipid bilayer of the neural element. However, it is well understood that stimulation at very high frequencies (~10 kHz) can lead to block of neural activity in isolated fibers in the periphery. Moreover, McCreery, et al., has demonstrated that continuous stimulation for periods of only seven hours can lead to Stimulation Induced Depression of Excitability (SIDNE)[77,78]. Other studies showed that

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continuous stimulation as short as 1 hr/day could lead to significantly different behavioral outcomes[79,80]. However, local activation and then subsequent decreased activation of local axons and their connected soma over the course of much shorter 30 second pulse trains suggest an underlying mechanism that has not been previously reported.

While inhibitory neurons are able to spike at higher rates than excitatory neurons, active cells in this study are mostly excitatory, indicating a persistence of activity with sustained stimulation and not higher spike rates (as observed in the plateau in fluorescence change in Fig. 5)[46,81]. In this fashion, the lack of excitation observed at high frequency stimulation may be due to increased inhibitory neuron activity (non-GCaMP expressing) near the stimulation site. In addition, various studies have demonstrated that electrical stimulation can cause diverse effects such as increases in hippocampal and thalamic volume, increases in blood vessel size and synaptic density, cortical dendrite growth, and changes in mRNA expression, some of which may influence short term local somatic and axonal response[82-95]. Future studies should be aimed at the difficult task of disentangling the complex network of dendrites, axons, and cell bodies of inhibitory and excitatory cells that may be present near the electrode in the brain[73]. Without complete understanding of how an exogenous electric field is interacting with neuronal and non-neuronal cells local to a chronically implanted electrode at the targeted point of intervention - and activating or inhibiting individual elements of these cells types – it is difficult to understand the mechanism by which targeted electrical stimulation may be creating desired therapeutic outcomes or undesirable side effects.

Under normal conditions, neuronal depolarization causes an influx of intracellular calcium through pathways such as voltage or neurotransmitter gated Ca^{2+} channels, which is measured by the GCaMP indicator[96]. The calcium influx then leads to a significant contribution from Ca^{2+} release through channels present in intracellular stores, mainly the endoplasmic reticulum[97]. Intracellular calcium can then induce local changes at the synaptic level and activate gene expression that are essential for synaptic plasticity[96]. Calcium activity has also been previously demonstrated during microelectrode insertion[98]. In order to prevent the mechanical strain related Ca activity influence stimulation evoked GCaMP activity, the tissue was allowed to rest 20 minutes after insertion prior to stimulation experiments, which was confirmed during the pre-stimulus period.

Active cells were identified as cells with intensity increased greater than 3 standard deviations of their pre-stimulation baseline fluctuation. While it is possible that the threshold selection might not have identified all active cells, GCaMP6s is very sensitive to neuronal activity even for single action potentials (>30% dF/F reported)[51]. Our criteria was robust for detection of low levels of activity even in the presence of small, unwanted signal changes due to motion or photomultiplier tube (PMT) dark current. Because the animal was under anesthesia, there was limited spontaneous activity as seen in pre-stimulation images in Figures 2 and 3. This likely helped detect stimulation-evoked activity in most GCaMP expressing neurons. In this study, calcium imaging was carried out at 50 µA, but it is worth nothing that in one animal, the impedance of the stimulated site was an order of magnitude lower than that listed by the manufacturer, suggesting insulation failure or other forms of shunting with the ground. In this animal, 100 µA stimulation current was necessary to drive GCaMP activity.

Further studies are necessary to better understand the cause of inhibition of calcium activity at higher frequencies. Examining the influence of downstream post-synaptic neuron activity will be an important step towards understanding the impact of stimulation frequency on the spatial distribution of activated neurons. It is possible that this frequency-dependent excitatory and inhibitory (or lack of excitation) pattern is the result of the interaction between the imposed changes in electric field and different neuronal processes in space. Lastly, the calcium impact on long-term changes in expressions of genes and synaptic properties further needs to be elucidated.

In chronic neuromodulation or neuroprosthetic applications, additional complexities are entangled from tissue changes in both the neuronal and non-neuronal populations due to the implantation injury (glia, neurovasculature, immune cells)[39,99-102], electrode material degradation[60,103-107], and plastic changes from long-term electrical stimulation[82-95,108]. For example, it is well understood that continuous stimulation at parameters above the safety limits (k>1.7~1.85) established by the Shannon curve can cause damage to tissue in the vicinity of the electrode, which is often attributed to driving toxic electrochemical reactions at the surface of the electrode, or driving local neural tissue to increase activity beyond physiological norms leading to 'excitotoxic' effects[45,60,82,108-110]. While this present study was carried out below the Shannon limit, the biological substrates of

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plasticity induced by clinically relevant stimulation parameters (below the Shannon Limit) over time are not well understood.

Limitations: In order to minimize the impact of SIDNE in this stimulation experiment and results, stimulation frequencies were evaluated in increasing frequencies instead of randomizing the frequency order. However, care was taken to allow baseline intensities to return to pre-stimulation baseline before another frequency was tested. Additionally, in two animals, 10 Hz trials were repeated after the entire frequency sequence and remained consistent with the first 10 Hz trial. Future studies should randomize one stimulation frequency to each implant location as well as evaluate the impact of the total number of stimulation pulses compared to stimulation frequency on driving SIDNE. A better understanding of these effects may further facilitate the application of continuous stimulation toward the growing field of neuromodulation therapies.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread use of electrical stimulation as a scientific tool and a modality to affect therapeutic outcomes, a lack in understanding of its effects on network-level neural activity has limited its applicability. While the present work is not a complete study on the large parameter space of electrical stimulation, we disprove the hypothesis that the sparse and distributed neural activation patterns occur under continuous stimulation in a frequency independent manner. Instead, different stimulation parameters can dramatically alter the activation pattern at the cellular level in cortex. A deeper understanding of electrical stimulation parameters on neuronal activation (and non-neuronal activation) will be critical in utilizing electrical stimulation for targeted applications in basic science research as well as clinical therapeutics. Thus, the current work motivates additional non-clinical, non-translational basic science research to elucidate the mechanisms governing electrical stimulation.

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All authors had full access to all the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. *Conceptualization*, T.D.Y.K., A.L.V., and K.A.L.; *Methodology*, N.J.M. and T.D.Y.K.; *Investigation,* J.R.E. and T.D.Y.K.; *Formal Analysis*, N.J.M., J.R.E., and R.I.I.; *Writing – Original Draft*, T.D.Y.K., K.A.L., and N.J.M.; *Writing – Review & Editing*, all authors; *Visualization*, N.J.M., T.D.Y.K. and R.I.I.; *Supervision*, T.D.Y.K.; *Funding Acquisition*, T.D.Y.K.

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