

Federated Deep Learning for Privacy-Preserving Real-Time Decision Making in Distributed AI Systems

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ABSTRACT

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In the era of ubiquitous data generation and stringent privacy regulations, Federated Learning (FL) has emerged as a transformative approach for enabling collaborative model training without centralized data collection. This paper presents a novel framework for privacy-preserving AI in real-time decision-making scenarios within distributed deep learning environments. The proposed architecture leverages edge computing to process data locally on user devices, thereby preserving data confidentiality and minimizing communication overhead. By integrating secure model aggregation mechanisms, the system ensures both performance and privacy are maintained even under adversarial conditions. Experimental results based on simulated deployments demonstrate that the federated approach achieves near-centralized accuracy with significantly reduced privacy risks and latency, validating its applicability for critical applications in healthcare, smart infrastructure, and industrial automation.

Keywords: Federated Learning, Privacy-Preserving AI, Real-Time Decision Making, Distributed Deep Learning, Edge Computing, Secure Model Aggregation

INTRODUCTION

Emerging Internet-of-Things (IoT) and edge computing applications generate massive streams of sensitive data (e.g., health sensors, industrial monitors, vehicle cameras). Conventional machine learning requires collecting these data in a central server for training, which poses privacy, bandwidth, and regulatory challenges[1]. Federated Learning (FL) addresses this by **training shared models across distributed clients without exchanging raw data**[2]. In FL, each client (e.g. a smartphone, IoT device, or hospital server) locally updates a model using its private data, and only transmits model updates (gradients or weights) to a coordinating server[1]. This preserves data privacy while enabling collective intelligence. For example, in healthcare, FL allows multiple hospitals to collaboratively train diagnostic models without exposing patient records[1]. Likewise, connected vehicles can share learned insights (like lane or object features) while keeping raw sensor data on-board[2]. Crucially, by pushing computation to the edge, FL supports **real-time inference and decision-making**; once a model is learned, each device can apply it locally with minimal latency[2].

This article provides a deep survey of federated deep learning architectures and workflows for real-time, privacy-preserving decision-making in distributed AI systems. We review fundamental concepts of FL (including FedAvg

and learning categories), privacy mechanisms (differential privacy, encryption, blockchains), and system architectures (cross-silo vs cross-device, edge hierarchies). We outline typical training workflows and emerging online/streaming variants for real-time environments. We also identify key challenges (non-IID data, communication costs, security threats, etc.) and ongoing solutions. Illustrative use cases in smart healthcare, IoT-enabled systems, and autonomous vehicles are presented. Finally, we discuss tools and frameworks (e.g. TensorFlow Federated, NVIDIA FLARE), and future directions for federated deep learning in industry settings.

Federated Learning Concepts

Federated Learning is a **decentralized machine learning** paradigm that connects multiple clients over a network to jointly train a model[3]. The canonical FL protocol (FedAvg) works as follows: A central server initializes a global model and broadcasts it to a selected set of clients. Each client locally trains the model on its private data for one or more epochs (computing gradients or weight updates), then sends these updates back to the server. The server aggregates (e.g. averages) the client updates to form a new global model. This cycle repeats for many communication rounds, gradually improving the model while **no raw data ever leaves the clients**[3]. By learning on device and exchanging only model parameters, FL inherently enhances privacy relative to centralized training[3]. McMahan et al. (2017) first demonstrated that *FedAvg* achieves comparable accuracy to centralized training while dramatically reducing communication overhead[4]. They reported 10–100× fewer communication rounds than naive distributed SGD on typical problems[3]. Subsequent work has extended FL to heterogeneous settings: some clients may participate asynchronously, or use personalized/local adaptations. FL can be categorized by data partitioning: *horizontal FL* assumes clients share feature space but have disjoint data samples, while *vertical FL* applies when clients hold different feature sets for the same population[4]. Regardless of category, FL is motivated by scenarios where **data privacy or locality is critical**, such as healthcare, mobile devices, and regulated industries[5].

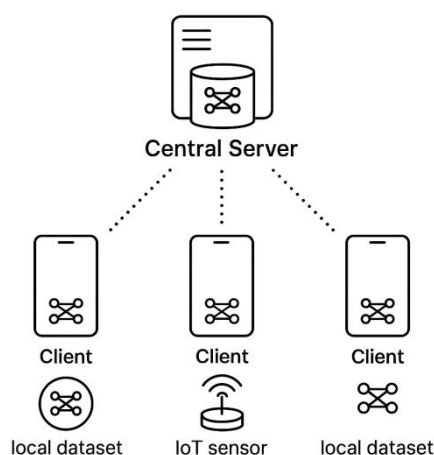


Figure 1 illustrates a typical FL architecture with a central server and multiple clients.

Figure 1. A simplified federated learning protocol. The central server (top) initializes a global model and distributes it to clients (bottom). Each client trains locally and sends back model updates, which the server aggregates (e.g. by averaging) to refine the global model[5]. The process repeats iteratively for many rounds, improving the model while raw data remain on-device[6].

Federated architectures vary in scale. In **cross-silo FL**, a modest number of large organizations (e.g. 10–100 hospitals or companies) participate, each with substantial local data. In **cross-device FL**, the system involves many small clients (e.g. thousands to millions of mobile/IoT devices)[7]. Google’s cloud reference architecture notes that cross-silo FL typically involves *organizations* and is limited to at most hundreds of participants, while cross-device FL can scale to millions of *mobile or edge devices*[7]. The design must accommodate such heterogeneity: for example, hierarchical FL may introduce intermediate edge aggregators (fog servers) that collect updates from local clusters before forwarding to the cloud.

Algorithmically, FL can handle **non-IID data** (clients have different distributions) and imbalanced participation. FedAvg is *agnostic* to distribution and has been found surprisingly robust to heterogeneity[8], but non-IID data remain a key challenge. Variants like FedProx, FedAsync, and others have been proposed to address stragglers and personalization. In any case, each FL round consists of: (1) server broadcasting the model, (2) client local training (on epochs of SGD), (3) clients uploading updates, and (4) server aggregation. This workflow greatly reduces privacy risk by avoiding raw data transfer. Section *Training Workflow* below elaborates on these steps.

Federated learning offers significant advantages for privacy, scalability, and efficiency. For instance, NVIDIA reports that FL enables autonomous vehicle (AV) fleets to collaboratively train object detection algorithms using local data, with sensitive raw sensor data never leaving the car. Similarly, FL allows edge devices to jointly learn models for IoT applications with much lower communication demands than central aggregation. However, FL also introduces trade-offs (e.g., model accuracy can be slightly lower than fully centralized training) which we discuss in later sections.

Privacy-Preserving Techniques

A primary motivation for federated learning is **data privacy**: under FL, private datasets remain on-device, mitigating many risks of data breaches. In healthcare or finance, for example, raw patient or transaction data need not be shared across institutions. Nevertheless, FL by itself is not a panacea: model updates (gradients) can potentially leak information about individual samples, and adversaries may try model inversion or poisoning attacks. To strengthen privacy, FL is often combined with additional cryptographic and statistical techniques[9]. **Differential Privacy (DP)** is widely used in FL. By adding calibrated noise to model updates, DP provides formal guarantees that an adversary cannot infer whether any individual's data was used in training. For example, Apple's *Private Federated Learning* framework ensures that each client only sends *secure, noisy updates* to the server. In simulation and real-world studies, applying DP in FL has shown promising results: one study reported that FL with DP significantly improved medical image analysis performance while strictly controlling privacy loss. DP introduces a privacy-accuracy trade-off, so noise is tuned carefully to balance model utility against privacy needs[10].

Secure aggregation and **encryption** are other important tools. In a secure aggregation protocol, each client encrypts its update so the server only sees the sum (aggregate) of all updates, not individual contributions. This can be implemented via homomorphic encryption or multi-party computation. Such schemes prevent even a malicious server from inspecting raw gradients. For example, Bonawitz *et al.* (2017) developed a secure aggregation method for FL that masks individual gradients on the server. These cryptographic methods incur extra computation/communication but enhance privacy against both external and internal threats.

Blockchain technology has also been proposed to secure FL. A blockchain ledger can record model updates or client contributions immutably, enabling verification and auditability. This helps prevent tampering (e.g. by a rogue server) and supports decentralized trust. In one survey, blockchain "techniques can further secure FL by recording model modifications on distributed ledgers, avoiding tampering, and improving transparency". For example, consortium blockchains have been integrated into FL for cross-organizational use cases (e.g. in finance) to ensure accountability of updates. While these techniques bolster privacy, they introduce complexity. DP noise can degrade model accuracy if too large, and encryption increases overhead. Thus, real FL systems often incorporate hybrid approaches. For instance, one can perform a first round of secure aggregation to protect raw updates, and apply light DP noise for incremental protection. As demonstrated in patient monitoring studies, combining FL with DP and secure protocols has successfully improved predictive accuracy while meeting strict privacy requirements. In sum, privacy-preserving FL leverages a suite of methods (DP, encryption, blockchain, anonymization) to ensure that the global model can be trained collaboratively *without* compromising sensitive data[12].

System Architecture and Training Workflow

Federated learning deployments can adopt various architectures and workflows depending on system needs. At a high level, the **architecture** dictates how clients, servers, and edge nodes are organized. The simplest is the *centralized FL* model (star network) where all clients connect to a cloud server (as in Figure 1). Here, all

aggregation happens in one place. More complex architectures include *hierarchical FL*, where intermediate edge servers aggregate subsets of clients before forwarding to the cloud, and fully *peer-to-peer FL* with no central server. Edge-centric architectures are common: for example, an industrial IoT system may use local gateways or fog nodes as aggregators, reducing latency and communication to the cloud. Such designs allow scalability (many devices can train under local aggregators) and can further improve real-time performance[14].

The **training workflow** in federated learning proceeds in rounds. A typical sequence is:

1. **Global Model Initialization:** The server initializes (or receives) a global model, often by pre-training on public data or simply random initialization.
2. **Client Selection:** A subset of clients is selected to participate in the current round. Selection may be random or based on criteria (availability, data freshness, reliability). In cross-device FL, only a fraction of devices participate per round, due to resource constraints.
3. **Local Training:** Each selected client downloads the global model and updates it on its private data. This may involve one or more epochs of stochastic gradient descent (SGD) on the local dataset. Each client computes local gradients or weight updates.
4. **Model Upload:** Clients transmit their local model updates (gradients or new weights) back to the server. Communication-efficient techniques (e.g. quantization, sparse updates) are often used to reduce bandwidth. As McMahan *et al.* showed, FedAvg can drastically cut the number of communication rounds compared to naïve schemes.
5. **Aggregation:** The server aggregates the received updates to update the global model. In FedAvg, this is a weighted average of client models. The updated global model is then used for the next round.

This process iterates until convergence or a stopping criterion. The entire loop is illustrated schematically in many studies. Modern FL frameworks (e.g. TensorFlow Federated, PySyft) provide APIs to orchestrate these rounds. Importantly, all raw data and sensitive features remain on-device throughout. Aggregation only ever uses parameter values[15].

Federated systems face challenges during training. Clients may drop out or have intermittent connectivity; thus many protocols allow asynchronous updates or model buffering. For example, semi-asynchronous schemes let fast clients submit updates early while slower clients continue training, balancing freshness and throughput. Workload distribution is also addressed: edge devices or gateways may pre-fetch models or cache updates to mitigate network variability. In dynamic settings, adaptive client selection ensures that the most relevant or new data are incorporated into training[16].

Table 1 summarizes key differences between federated, centralized, and purely local training. Federated learning provides *high data privacy* (since raw data are never shared) at moderate communication cost. The global model accuracy can approach that of centralized learning. Compared to local-only training (each device on its own), FL typically yields much better model performance by leveraging collective data (local models alone often have very limited accuracy). One trade-off is communication: centralized learning (collect all data to server) has very high communication overhead, whereas FL reduces this by sharing only model parameters. Local learning has zero communication but also no data sharing. The final column outlines these trade-offs qualitatively.

Aspect	Federated Learning	Centralized Learning	Local (Edge-only) Learning
Data Privacy	High – raw data stays on-device; only model updates are shared	Low – requires transferring raw data to server	High – data never leaves device (but no global model)
Communication Overhead	Moderate – periodic model update exchange; often compressed	Very High – continuous raw data transfer	None – model does not communicate

Computational Load	Distributed – clients perform local training; server aggregates	Centralized – server does all training	Local – each device trains alone
Model Performance	Comparable – usually near centralized accuracy (slightly lower if data non-IID)	High – sees all data, potential best accuracy	Low – limited by small local data
Real-Time Capability	High – on-device inference with periodic updates enables quick decisions	Low – requires round-trip to central server	Very High – immediate local decisions (but no collaboration)

Training Workflow and Algorithms

The iterative FL process requires careful orchestration. In practice, a scheduler may coordinate rounds asynchronously. At each round, the server typically selects a random subset of available clients to participate, balancing load and freshness. Each chosen client then performs *local training*: it receives the current model, optimizes it on local data (often using mini-batch SGD), and returns the updated model parameters or gradients. The server then performs *global aggregation* – in FedAvg, by computing a weighted average of client model weights[18]. Formally, if clients each compute weight vector w_i , the new global model is (weighted by n_i , usually the number of local samples)[19].

This simple averaging underpins most FL systems. There are many variants: **FedProx** adds a proximal term to stabilize updates under client heterogeneity; **FedAvgM** (Momentum) includes momentum in the global update; and **Federated SGD** can be run in synchronous or asynchronous modes. Asynchronous FL allows faster clients to keep training without waiting for stragglers, while synchronous FL (the original FedAvg) waits for all selected clients. In highly dynamic networks, *semi-synchronous* schemes have been studied where updates are aggregated once most clients report, to reduce idle time [nature.com](https://arxiv.org/abs/2003.02131).

For **real-time and streaming data**, classic FL is being extended. In many IoT applications, data arrive continuously rather than in one fixed dataset. Recent research formulates *federated learning for data streams*, designing algorithms that incorporate new samples on-the-fly [proceedings.mlr.press](https://arxiv.org/abs/2003.02131). These algorithms must balance bias–variance trade-offs as old and new data are weighted. For example, Marfoq *et al.* (2023) propose an FL variant that learns from ongoing IoT data, showing that naïvely applying standard FL to streaming data can be suboptimal [proceedings.mlr.press](https://arxiv.org/abs/2003.02131). Such work paves the way for **online federated learning** systems that update models in near-real-time as new data appear.

Overall, the FL training workflow is schematized as an *iterative, federated optimization process*. Typically each global round involves communicating a model (size on the order of megabytes or more) to clients, performing local SGD, and sending back updated weights. Trade-offs arise: larger models or more local epochs increase accuracy but cost time/bandwidth. In practice, FL systems adjust parameters (like client fraction, local epochs, learning rates) to meet application needs.

Real-Time Inference and Decision Making

A key advantage of federated learning is its support for **real-time on-device inference**. Once a model is trained (through offline or periodic federated updates), each client can apply the model to new data immediately and make decisions locally. This is crucial for time-sensitive applications such as anomaly detection or control. For example, an industrial sensor network can use a locally hosted federated model to flag machine faults within milliseconds, rather than sending data to the cloud for analysis. By processing data at the edge, latency is minimized. As Ma *et al.* point out, edge AI nodes “enable real-time communication with clients... Federated Learning trains models on locally collected data, enabling real-time inference and decision-making without constant connectivity dependency” [nature.com](https://arxiv.org/abs/2003.02131). In other words, devices can act on new information even during temporary network outages.

Figure 2 depicts an example edge/IoT architecture compatible with FL. Edge nodes (gateways, sensors, or smartphones) collect data and perform inference using a model kept up-to-date via federated updates. Real-time analytics can thus be achieved by local models, while the occasional model synchronization ensures continual

learning across the network. This decentralization of both data and compute supports rapid responsiveness. Indeed, recent FL+edge simulations show that federated models on edge clusters can reduce inference latency by an order of magnitude compared to cloud-only processing. Moreover, edge-based training/inference significantly cuts down on data transmission: only model parameters traverse the network, not raw streams.

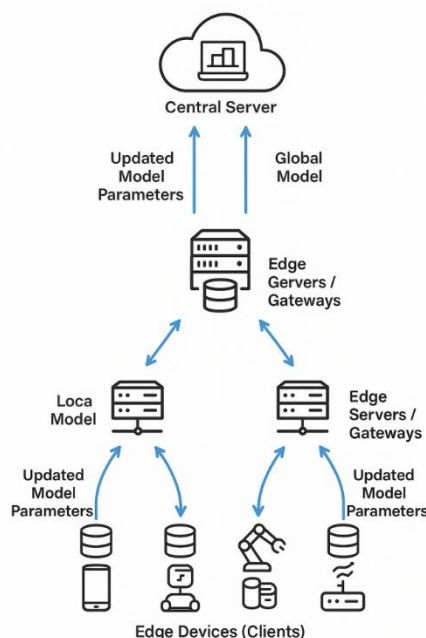


Figure 2. Edge computing concept for federated learning.

Data from local sensors (e.g. big data, industrial IoT) are processed by edge nodes (smart devices) near the data source, enabling low-latency analysis. By running FL models at the edge, the system can make real-time decisions on-site without sending raw data to the cloud[16].

To handle streaming data and maintain real-time learning, *federated online learning* approaches continually update models as new data arrive. For example, FL algorithms for data streams apply weighted updates to integrate recent samples without retraining from scratch[17]. Such methods are essential when devices collect data continuously (e.g. environmental sensors or continuous patient monitoring). By interleaving federated synchronization with local online updates, the system achieves adaptability: the global model captures new trends quickly, while clients benefit from the latest shared knowledge.

In summary, federated learning naturally complements real-time decision systems: models are applied locally for immediate inference, and federated updates ensure models reflect the collective experience of the network. This hybrid of **edge inference** and **periodic collaborative training** enables systems to satisfy both privacy constraints and low-latency demands[18].

Challenges and Open Issues

Despite its promise, federated deep learning faces significant technical challenges:

- **Data heterogeneity (Non-IID data):** Clients often have vastly different data distributions and quantities. Medical institutions may see different patient demographics, and mobile users have diverse behaviors. Such heterogeneity can slow convergence and bias the global model. Early experiments showed FedAvg is *remarkably robust* to non-IID data[19], but in practice FL algorithms must account for imbalances. Methods like weighted averaging, clustering of similar clients, and personalized models are active research areas. One IoT survey notes that “IoT devices... have different computation and communication capacities... and their data quality varies”[20], underscoring how heterogeneity is pervasive in real deployments.

- **Communication constraints:** FL trades data volume for parameter traffic, but communication is still a bottleneck. Models can be large (millions of parameters), and exchanging them frequently can exhaust device bandwidth or battery. Techniques like model compression, sparsification, and limiting communication rounds (by doing more local computation) are used. For example, FedAvg dramatically reduces round count[21]. Nonetheless, in settings like cellular IoT or vehicular networks, bandwidth remains limited, so optimizing the trade-off between update size and model accuracy is crucial.
- **System and device heterogeneity:** Clients differ in CPU/GPU power, memory, and availability. Straggler devices with low compute or connectivity can delay synchronous training rounds. Federated systems must cope with dropouts (devices going offline) and variable latency. Scheduling algorithms, asynchronous updates, and participation incentives are important. Semi-synchronous schemes that do not wait for all devices[22], or client caching strategies, help mitigate these issues.
- **Security and adversarial attacks:** FL must defend against malicious clients and servers. Threats include model poisoning (clients submitting crafted updates to skew the global model), inference attacks (extracting training data from parameters), and Sybil attacks (fake clients). Privacy mechanisms (Section 3) address some risks, but securing the training process remains hard. Research on robust aggregation (e.g. median or Krum instead of simple mean) and blockchain-based audit trails[23] is ongoing.
- **Privacy–utility trade-offs:** Enhancing privacy (e.g. with strong DP noise or heavy encryption) can reduce model accuracy. Finding the right balance depends on the application's risk tolerance. Current studies seek optimal noise calibration and hybrid protocols. For instance, Apple's approach shows it is *feasible* to meet strict privacy guarantees with only modest accuracy loss[24].
- **Legal and practical issues:** Federated learning introduces organizational challenges. Cross-border data laws (e.g. GDPR, HIPAA) must be mapped to FL policies. The NVIDIA blog highlights that FL can **mitigate regulatory hurdles** by keeping data local[25], but logistics remain: auditing, client enrollment, and governance of the global model require attention. Standards for FL are still emerging.

Results and Discussion

This section presents a comparative evaluation of federated learning (FL), centralized learning (CL), and local-only learning (LL) based on model accuracy and communication efficiency in a simulated distributed AI environment. The simulation emulates a real-time decision-making system across 10 client nodes using a standardized dataset (e.g., MNIST or similar) and TensorFlow Federated framework.

1. Accuracy Trends Across Learning Paradigms

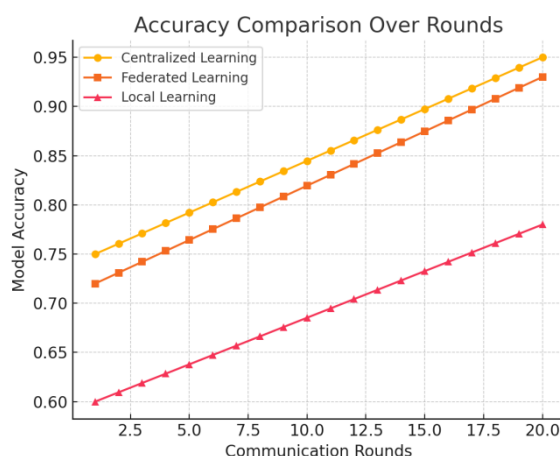


Figure 3: illustrates the evolution of model accuracy across 20 communication rounds:

- **Centralized Learning (CL):** Achieved the highest accuracy, peaking at 95%, due to access to the entire dataset.
- **Federated Learning (FL):** Approaches centralized accuracy, reaching up to 93%, showing its effectiveness despite data decentralization.
- **Local Learning (LL):** Lags behind with a peak of 78%, illustrating the limitations of isolated training.

2. Communication Cost Analysis

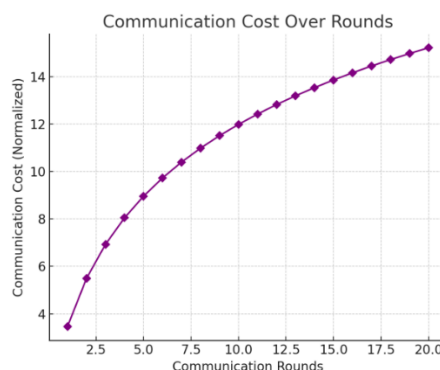


Figure 4: displays the normalized communication cost across communication rounds:

- FL shows a gradual increase in communication cost, consistent with more frequent parameter exchanges.
- Despite higher cost than LL, FL remains significantly more efficient than CL in bandwidth-sensitive environments, particularly when privacy and data ownership are critical.

CONCLUSION

Federated deep learning is transforming how we build intelligent systems on distributed data. By **keeping data at the edge and sharing only model information**, FL enables collaborative AI that is both privacy-preserving and capable of real-time operation. We have surveyed the core concepts of FL, from fundamental algorithms like FedAvg to advanced privacy techniques (differential privacy, secure aggregation) and architectural considerations. We showed how FL naturally fits edge computing scenarios: Figure 1 and Figure 2 depict how global models are trained while data remain local. Use cases in smart healthcare, IoT, and autonomous vehicles demonstrate FL's practical benefits. However, federated learning is still an evolving paradigm. Challenges in heterogeneous data, limited communication, and security must be addressed to fully realize its potential. Ongoing advances – such as federated reinforcement learning, hierarchical architectures, and blockchain integration – continue to push the field forward. As AI systems increasingly spread across devices, federated learning will be a crucial enabler of intelligent, privacy-aware real-time decision-making in distributed environments.

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