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## Social Networks and Information Systems: Ongoing and Future Research Streams

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# Journal of the Association for Information Systems

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Special Issue

## Social Networks and Information Systems: Ongoing and Future Research Streams

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### Abstract

*We review reasons for the increased interest in network analyses in organization studies and information research. We also note the impact of new information technology capabilities for this increase in terms of improvements in analysis techniques, new ways to generate and maintain connections within and between social units, and new social connection-focused IT capabilities. We also review main streams of network-based analyses in information system research. We conclude by making some propositions for future research in information systems and networks, and summarize the main contributions made in this special issue.*

**Keywords:** networks, network analysis, information technology, research challenges

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# Social Networks and Information Systems: Ongoing and Future Research Streams

## 1. Introduction

Social networks provide a simple yet powerful abstraction for social scientists that can represent almost any type of human interaction or connection, including their structure and dynamics. Social network analysts observe a social world consisting of nodes (social or other types of units like persons, teams, organizations, or their combinations) and ties among them (connections like communications, dependence, or vicinity). These relatively simple discrete “ontologies” offer a surprisingly fruitful way to analyze how social formations organize, change, and grow. By focusing on networks, social scientists can explain: a) the observed structure of social formations and b) how the structure affects other critical traits of social units or formations such as their rate of innovation, change, performance, or operational failures.

Empirical studies over the last 40 years have resulted in multiple theories of networks and a rich corpus of data and empirics (Barabasi 2003; Christakis and Fowler 2009; Monge and Contractor 2003; Nohria and Eccles 1992; Shapiro and Varian 1999). At the same time, new powerful computational methods have become an indispensable research tool helping scientists to conduct increasingly complex network analyses (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Lazer et al. 2009). These analyses provide the unprecedented ability to trace, visualize, analyze, explain, and simulate the structures and behaviors of social networks (Agarwal et al. 2008; Lazer et al. 2009). Recently, web-based collaborative software has generated new forms and modalities of interactions that are fundamentally re-shaping the structure of existing social formations while at the same time creating new ones. Not surprisingly, a growing stream of research on social networks has, therefore, been devoted to the design and uses of information technology in social contexts and their impacts on organizations (Agarwal et al. 2008; Wasko and Faraj 2005), as well as how they shape end-user behaviors (Fogg and Iizawa 2008; Steiny 2009; Oinas-Kukkonen and Harjuma 2009).

Social networks are a rapidly growing research area for information system scholars. Social network analysis, or more broadly network analysis, provides a rich, rigorous, and systematic means for IS scholars to assess networks and their structure as organized or enabled by various information systems. In this way scholars can map and analyze relationships generated by IT artifacts among people, teams, departments, organizations, or even geographical regions or markets (Cross et al. 2001; Lazer et al. 2009). Web-based services, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, also convey new means to render interpersonal relationships more transparent and traceable, and allow researchers to study how such information is being deployed by social agents. Users can now connect with ease to their friends and business acquaintances and keep them aware of their activities. As a result, they can now probe for others in the same networks based on queries like “who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person.”

Even though studies on social networks have been conducted in fields like sociology and anthropology for decades, recent developments in web and related real-time collaboration tools provide a rich and unprecedented opportunity to re-examine some assumptions and findings concerning the structure and behavior of social networks. They also offer new computational models and data to investigate the dynamics and structure of “on-line social networks.” This surge has also promoted the use of the digital networks and related network-based information for understanding decision-making, organizing, and innovation. Prominent concepts related to the web, known as Web 2.0 and social web, are receiving greater attention among practitioners. Both academics and industry advocates have recognized social networks as one of the key elements of the next generation web (Parameswaran and Whinston 2007).

In the new digital economy, where inter-organizational collaboration and innovation are becoming more central to organizational effectiveness, attention must be paid to the relationships that people weave and draw upon whilst accomplishing their work. Successful information-seeking is a mix of recognizing what another person knows, valuing that knowledge, being able to gain timely access to that person, and seeking the information in cost-effective ways (Borgatti and Cross 2003; Hollingshead et al. 2002; Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak 2008; Moreland and Argote 2004; Ren et al.

2006; Rulke and Galaskiewicz 2000). Many of these elements are shaped by new IT capabilities and tools. Therefore, the role of IT in shaping social networks is receiving increased attention.

## 2. Research on Social Networks and IS

Traditional approaches to social networks seek to explain and predict social interactions through network structures expressed in patterns of links among nodes. These approaches privilege the structural characteristics of the network (i.e., the patterns of connection among nodes) over individual attributes of the nodes and represent a shift in social inquiries away from atomistic approaches to contextual and relational ones. Consequently, social network approaches have been used in organizational studies in many ways (Monge and Contractor 2003; Borgatti and Foster 2003; Parkhe et al. 2006; Hoang and Antoncic 2003). They have been used to understand and explain the behaviors of multiple social formations including teams, organizations, industries, and most recently, technology-mediated communities (Barabasi 2003; Christakis and Fowler 2009; Monge and Contractor 2003; Nohria and Eccles 1992; Shapiro and Varian 1999). They have also been used to study different elements of such formations including social capital (Granovetter 1995; Burt 1992), embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1997; Saxenian 1994), new structures (Powell 1990; Eccles 1981), governance (Mizruchi 1996), joint ventures (Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr, 1996), and dynamics (Carley 1991; Ibarra 1992), among others.

Recently, IS scholars have also started appropriating social network approaches (Agarwal et al. 2006). The IS research drawing on social networks can be divided into the following streams: 1) network awareness at both individual and organizational levels, 2) uses of social network analysis related to IS use, and 3) conceptual and technological change in the fast evolving platforms to manage social networks.

First, network analysis helps increase *organizational and individual network awareness* (Steiny and Oinas-Kukkonen 2007). This involves depicting and understanding an individual's linkages within and outside an organization, including determining who knows what (Hansen 1999; Majchrzak et al. 2007). This has become increasingly important in understanding the organization's collective intelligence. Moreover, resources available for an organization to seek new knowledge can multiply through its social networks and related knowledge flows. Harvesting these networks is poorly understood and rarely well supported. Rendering informal networks visible helps managers to systematically assess and strategically support important collaboration.

*The second stream of research that focuses on organizational uses of information technology involving network analysis* includes topics like knowledge management, strategic management, and business intelligence and innovation (Ahuja and Carley 1999; Argote and Ingram 2000; Wasko and Faraj 2005; Majchrzak et al. 2007; Moreland and Argote 2004; Oinas-Kukkonen 2008). Organizationally, network analysis can be used as an aid to knowledge management, providing a clearer picture of the structure and projects within the organization (Lipnack and Stamps 1997). Likewise, network analysis can be used as a tool for strategic management, as it is applicable to managing specific strategic processes, such as strengthening of cooperation and integration processes after a merger. It is a valuable resource to improve collaboration in strategic business units, new product development teams, communities of practice, or joint ventures (Cross et al. 2002). Network analysis can pinpoint breakdowns in informal networks that cross functional, hierarchical, geographical, or organizational boundaries. Network analysis can be also used for business intelligence and innovation, in particular when ideas are transferred from one social world to another. Innovations have been found to arise more readily in the context of bridge-building that results in new knowledge flows through weak ties (Hargadon 2003). As an integral part of innovating, network analysis can also be utilized to characterize innovation regions on a larger scale (Saxenian 1994).

Finally, there are many open research issues related to *platforms for managing social networks* at individual, team, organizational, and inter-organizational levels. We believe that so far we have seen only early forms of social network-based information systems. The currently dominant platforms build upon specific metaphors and associated tools for representing and building the networks. Yet, it is too

early to say whether these platforms represent the only alternatives, which ones will emerge as dominant designs, and what will be the overall ecology of social networking based IT capabilities. It is highly likely that new computing platforms for creating and managing social networks will emerge, while some of the current capabilities will disappear (anyone remember Friendster?). Thus, the arena of social network-based information systems is prone to continue its dramatic growth and change. New capabilities are likely to be more tightly integrated within the emerging web of social computing capabilities including, e.g., instant mobile messaging systems, sensor-based technologies like Radio Frequency Identification, Near Field Communication, and new forms of location-based capabilities. Indeed, the whole phenomenon of social networks will continue to evolve fast as digital technology increasingly penetrates in the realm of the physical world, providing new research challenges for IS scholars (Yoo 2010).

We can observe the following directions for future research within IS on networks:

- How does network awareness change the behaviors of users, teams, or organizational processes?
- How do people revise their attitudes and beliefs based on new types of knowledge harvested from new types of networks?
- How do network structures affect decisions concerning adoption and diffusion of IT-enabled innovations?
- How and to what extent can and should organizations track and map the social networks they are involved in? What are the organizational, technical, social, and ethical considerations regarding this tracking?
- What kind of web-based and other tools are needed to share different types of knowledge through networks?
- How are different IT-enabled capabilities changing the structure and dynamics of networks within and across organizations and different units of analysis?
- What are the effects of network density and structure on innovation outcomes and organizational agility?
- How do new network-based communities evolve over time? What are the relationships between the structural characteristics of the network and the dynamic patterns of development of such communities and the underlying technical capabilities?

### 3. Contributions in This Issue

This special issue of JAIS emphasizes research that applies social network analyses to information systems as socio-technical systems. We hoped to solicit contributions where both social and technical elements are seen to constitute part of the network. Overall, we received 18 submissions, out of which two papers were finally accepted after two rounds of reviews. Both of the articles relate to network awareness at a user level rather than at an organizational level. Some of the research findings, however, may be relevant at an organizational level at least for theory development or for methodological purposes.

The first article, “The Evolution of Interaction Networks in Massively Multiplayer Online Games” by Johannes Putzke, Kai Fischbach, Detlef Schoder, and Peter Gloor addresses a timely topic: interaction and cooperation networks in massive multiplayer games (Putzke et al. 2010). It reviews recent studies of social behaviors in online game environments. The researchers utilize archival data on message transmission and game performance as well as gender and age information to test multiple hypotheses that state relationships among individual characteristics, interaction networks, and game performance. The results have interesting implications for understanding emerging social structures in online environments.

The second article, “Online discussion group sustainability: Investigating the interplay between structural dynamics and social dynamics over time” by Catherine Ridings and Molly Wasko, studies how networks, in particular online discussion groups, are sustained over time (Ridings and Wasko, 2010). The authors propose that the group’s sustainability is an outcome of interplay between structural and social dynamics over time. The article adopts an unusual mixed-methods approach to

provide both qualitative and quantitative support for claims by investigating the dynamics of an online discussion group over five years. Their results confirm the observation of power law distribution of participation: Only a few members of an online community will significantly contribute content when measured in message volume. The authors also show that these distributions change over time and that too "steep" of a distribution of participation may result in a decline in online participation.

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