



# Mapping civil society with social network analysis: Methodological possibilities and limitations



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibility of using social network analysis and visualization as a tool for qualitative research in human geography. The approach uses formal network analysis in concert with ethnographic research methods. Specifically, we take a performative approach to network analysis that sees network visualization as a process that produces space for research. Using networks of civil society organizations as our example, this paper highlights the debates over what social network analysis allows and omits, focusing in particular on issues related to flows, power, boundary demarcation and abstraction. From a methodological perspective, much can be lost when the conceptual and theoretical arguments about networks are applied to the material and embodied practices that constitute network relations. Nevertheless, the formal analysis of such networks can provide a representation of relationships at a moment in time that can help to both express those relationships and to open new questions that can be explored using other methods. Just as abstraction is used in an iterative process to move between empirical evidence and conceptual and theoretical arguments, the representation of networks can be part of a methodological approach that moves between the representation of relationships and the ways that various agents express, experience, and remake those relationships. Using the example of research on NGOs and civil society organizations promoting citizenship for young people in divided societies, we explore the utility – and limitations – of working in the liminal space of formal network analysis and more ethnographic approaches.

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## Introduction

The term ‘network’ has become a pervasive spatial and organizational metaphor for describing sets of complex interactions. However, the pervasiveness of the term masks the different “analytical commitments” that underpin divergent conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of networks (Johnston et al., 2000, p. 498). Within sociology, the formal analysis of networks is a well-established subfield. In this area of research, social network analysis (SNA) is used to uncover structural patterns of social relations. Formal approaches to network analysis have lately been taken up by geographers, mainly within economic geography (Broekel and Boschma, 2012; Gluckler, 2007; Ter Wal and Boschma, 2009; Yeung, 1994). In addition to mapping distribution networks, supply chains, and transnational financial streams, SNA has been used to analyse diffusion of industrial innovation, (Breschi and Lissoni, 2009; Howells, 2012; Howells and Bessant, 2012; Huggins and Thompson, 2013), and other forms of

informational flow such as ‘buzz’ (Mould and Joel, 2010) and corporate knowledge transfer (O’Hagan and Green, 2004). In other areas of geography, formal approaches have been applied to mapping knowledge networks within the discipline itself (Socio, 2010) – a popular use of SNA across disciplines-while others have explored the potential in combining SNA with GIS (Luke, 2005; Radil et al., 2010).

Critics of social network analysis argue that this formal approach to the study of complex relationships risks confusing cause with effect. That is, analysis that emphasizes the structure of networks tends to offer deterministic explanations of social phenomena, without providing any insight into the processes by which network relations form, or the meanings and norms that govern their functioning (Fuhse and Mützel, 2011). Bucking against this tendency are more cultural and reflexive approaches to network analysis, such as those offered by relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; White, 1992), ethnographic studies of networks (Riles, 2001; White and Johansen, 2004), and Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law and Hassard, 1999). It has been largely through the latter vein that political and cultural geographers have engaged in the conversation on network ontologies. The network

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metaphor has been particularly useful to geographers in theorizing relational approaches to space and scale (Amin, 2002; Bulkeley, 2005; Dicken et al., 2001; Jones, 2009; Sheppard, 2002). As Latour (1999) explains, network ontology collapses the micro/macro dualism in its various incarnations (local/global, individual/society), through a methodological focus on the situated movement and mobility of actors. However, Marston et al. (2005, p. 423) warn against celebrating network fluidity and mobility while ignoring the “large variety of blockages, coagulations and assemblages (everything from material objects to doings and sayings) that congeal in space and social life.” Using ethnographic approaches geographers have interrogated the various social and material blockages that constrain and enable network mobility by attending to the embodied practices produced by and that produce network imaginaries (Larner and Laurie, 2010; Routledge, 2008; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009).

Thus, despite the ubiquity of the term ‘network’, an often unacknowledged and unresolved tension exists between these different analytical, conceptual, and methodological approaches to researching different kinds of networks. Indeed, there would seem to be irreconcilable epistemological differences between the structuralist empiricism of quantitative, formal approaches using SNA and the post-structural constructivism of ANT and certain ethnographic approaches, which see networks as, in part, artefacts of the research process itself (Knox et al., 2006; Riles, 2001). Working within this tension between more formal, analytical approaches and more reflexive, ethnographic modes of network analysis, we argue that network analysis and visualization can be used as an iterative tool for qualitative research in human geography.

Our approach uses formal network analysis in concert with ethnographic research methods. Specifically, we take a performative approach to network analysis, viewing network visualization as process that produces a space for research. Taking networks of civil society organizations as our example, this paper highlights the debates over what social network analysis allows and omits, focusing in particular on issues related to flows, power, boundary demarcation and abstraction. From a methodological perspective, much can be lost when the conceptual and theoretical arguments about networks are applied to the material and embodied practices that constitute network relations. Nevertheless, sets of relationships at particular moments in time can be rendered visible through processes and representations that can open new questions amenable to exploration using other methods. In a fully iterative process, those new questions – and their ‘answers’ – can be used to refine the representations of the networks and to make qualitative and interpretive analyses more robust. In short, just as abstraction is used in an iterative process to move between empirical evidence and conceptual and theoretical arguments, the representation of networks enables the representation of relationships and the ways that various agents express, experience, and remake those relationships. We use the example of research on NGOs and civil society organizations promoting citizenship for young people in divided societies to explore the utility – and limitations – of working in the liminal space of formal network analysis and ethnographic approaches. Our goal in using this example is to explore the methodological implications of conceptualising networks and representations as performative in a broad sense and is not limited to – or even focused upon – our analysis of NGOs.

### Networks as conceptual and analytical devices

Within the social sciences, network analysis is best defined as “the disciplined inquiry into the patterning of relationships among actors” (Breiger, 2004, p. 505). White (2004, p. 173) emphasizes

that social network analysis is specifically concerned with the study of “social and cultural phenomena” that “emerge” out of observable interaction, such as communication, exchange, and other forms of social relations unfolding over time. However, there is no singular methodological or theoretical approach to the study of networks in the social sciences. What does unify diverse approaches to network analysis, however, is a focus on relationships between actors. Network analysis is by definition relational. That is, the units of analysis in network studies are not aggregate social categories or individual actors, but rather, the interaction between actors in a given field. This is what Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) refer to when they describe network analysis as being driven by an “anticategorical imperative,” rejecting attempts to explain human behavior with reference to the social categories to which people are ascribed. Despite the shared focus on relationality, their anticategorical imperatives, and common roots in social anthropology, network analysis in the social sciences has been riven by deep inter- and intra-disciplinary divisions, almost since its inception (Foster, 1978; Knox et al., 2006). Formal SNA maintains an empiricist confidence in the actually existing nature of social networks structures: if they can be measured, they must be real, and have real effects. Indeed, as Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) argue, the “forbidding self-presentation” of formal social network analysis projects a kind of quantitative explanatory certitude that puts off sceptical “outsiders.” This view conflicts with more reflexive and constructivist approaches that see networks as artefacts of network analysis itself. Although we share a certain scepticism about the explanatory potential of formal network analysis on its own, we nevertheless see great value in network visualization being used as part of an inductive research process. This section will tease out the tensions, as well as consonances, between the different approaches to network analysis described above. These tensions can be productively mediated, if not resolved, through a combined approach that utilizes network visualizations as conceptual diagrams that, in turn, open spaces for research, rather than constructing hermetically sealed research outcomes.

Most origin stories about the emergence of social network analysis trace its genesis to the Manchester school of social anthropology; specifically, Barnes (1954) and Bott (1971 [1957]) are credited with developing the network concept in anthropology. However, as early as 1940, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was referring to social structure as a “complex network of social relations” that connected people and groups to one another (Breiger, 2004; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). Initially an admirer of anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin, Radcliffe-Brown later drew upon the process philosophy of Alfred Whitehead (whose thought was developed in conversation with American Pragmatists like John Dewey, and later inspired French post-structuralists such as Gilles Deleuze) to argue for an anthropology focused on social processes rather than structures as such (Graeber, 2004; Ingold, 2007; Singer, 1984). In his oft-quoted 1940 address to the Royal Anthropological Institute Radcliffe-Brown (1940, p. 3–4) proclaimed: “In the study of social structure, the concrete reality with which we are concerned is the set of actually existing relations, at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings.” Rather than explaining individual human behavior through reference to abstract, overarching social structures like class or kinship, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that the existence of such social relations can only be confirmed by observing social interactions. Around the same time, Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology sought to examine the complexity of interdependent social relations between actors, taking those relational processes rather than the actors themselves (or their aggregate characteristics) as the foundational unit of analysis (Elias, 2000 [1939]; Fuhse and Mützel, 2011). This focus on interaction and process remain key features of network thinking

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